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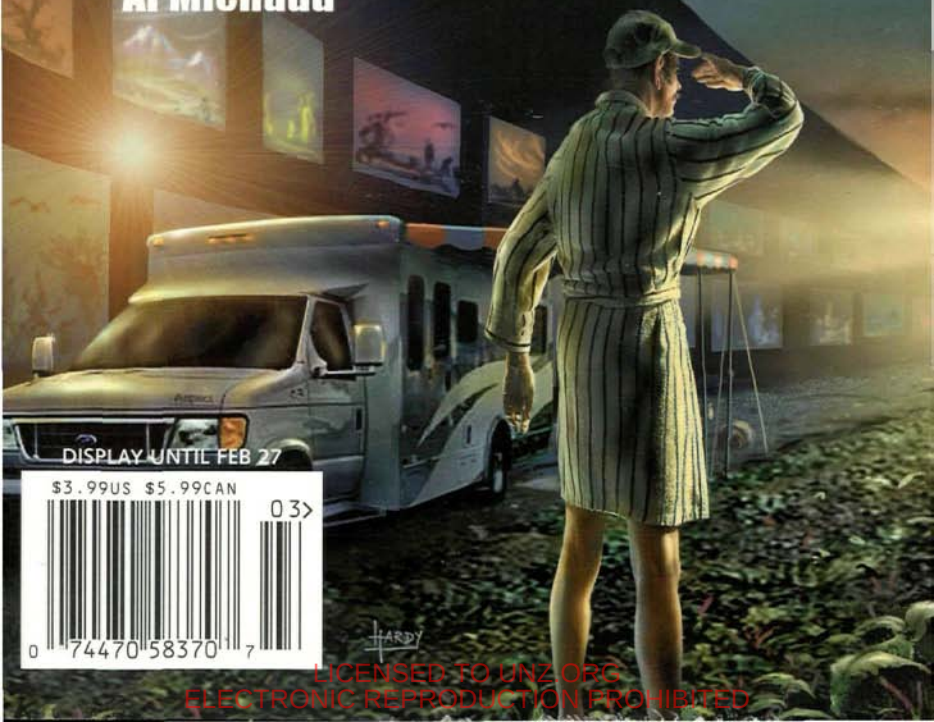
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Albert Cowdrey's New Orleans teems with oddballs and eccentrics of both natural and supernatural origins. So why not write a book about them? That's the idea one young man has in Mr. Cowdrey's latest tale from the Crescent City. But even a good idea like this one requires a bit of luck in order to succeed. However, one should recall the old Swedish proverb: "Luck never gives; it only lends."

The Amulet

By Albert E. Cowdrey

TIM DALEY HAD JUST TAKEN a small blue card from a crippled beggar when a bearded man emerged from the Trash & Treasures Antique Mall in the

French Quarter.

"Joo give money to Harry?" he demanded as the beggar rolled away.

"Uh, uh, uh, yes," admitted Tim. He was a thin young man with a greenish complexion caused by involuntary dieting.

"Why joo wanna encourage that crook? So he don't have no legs, so what? I got troubles, too, but I don't go around beggin'."

Tim sighed. He'd already wasted his morning interviewing the Duck Lady and her principal mallard. Now the beard was reaming him out and he faced a new session with (probably) another dreary bore.

"I'm looking," he said, "for, uh, uh, Signora Clara Donà. This is the address she gave me, but —"

"Backa the store and up the stairs."

Heading through musty shadows toward the corkscrew of an iron staircase, Tim glanced at Harry's card, which said *Blessed are the Generous.*

"Blessed are the suckers, you mean," he muttered, and deposited the card in a tray of second-hand Christmas tree ornaments marked "Genuine Antiques."

At the head of the stairs a door opened into a huge, dim room crowded with furniture. An obese old lady in spectacular pajamas was lying on a daybed; as Tim entered, she popped a Godiva chocolate into her mouth and gazed at him with pinprick eyes.

He mumbled, "Uh, uh, I'm Timothy Daley —"

"So you da boy writin' da book," she said, extending a small fat sticky hand. Her voice resembled those distant, ghostly utterances sometimes heard over the Mexico City phone system; her Italian (?) accent was Basic Ethnic Stereotype.

"Siddown and take a load off," she buzzed, licking her fingers.

Tim looked around helplessly. All the chairs, of which there were many, seemed to be used for the sorting — or at any rate the deposit — of laundry.

"Here, sweepa da merda off," she ordered and — though not sure what *merda* meant — he complied.

"It was, uh, nice of you to answer my ad, Signora," he said, turning on his pocket recorder. "So you've lived an unusual and exciting life?"

"Say dat again."

"Can I ask when and where you were born?"

"Venezia," she said, "rounabout 1294."

"Uh, uh, uh, 1294?"

"Sump'm like dat. Course it's long ago, and it all gets smoggy, like. But *milleduecento novantaquattro*... yeah... I'ma pretty sure it was 1294. Or maybe five."

"How did you, uh, uh, happen to live so long?"

"Da Polo amulet. Ever hear of it?"

"Nnnnnno, I don't think so."

"Then relax, Honey," she said. "Sit back onna chair — it'sa bad for you spine, sitting onna edge'a you *culo* like'a dat. Take it easy, and I'ma give you a good story for you book."

SIGNORA INTERVIEW DAY 1

(As Transcribed, Edited and Corrected by Timothy Daley)

The Polo amulet is merely the most amazing thing in the world, if not the universe. I saw it first in 1308.

My name was Portofino in those days, Clara Portofino, and I was only fourteen. Girls grew up fast then, and I was living with a guy named Sbacco in two rooms above his dark little shop on the Alley of the Assassins. Besides being ugly, Sbacco was a lousy goldsmith, so we lived in poverty.

One day I was sitting in the shop, thinking seriously about running off with a Senator's lackey who had the most darling little beard, when a new customer ducked in through our doorway. I recognized him at once: his name was Marco Polo, and he was famous as the biggest liar in Venice. And I was surprised by his gray beard, for the last time I'd seen him in the Rialto, his beard had been black.

He selected a cheap gold ring and Sbacco named a price and settled down to bargain, which was half the fun of the business. But Polo didn't want to bargain. Instead, with trembling hands he took out a gold disc engraved with odd-looking little chicken tracks, and said he wanted to swap *il amuleto* for the ring.

Sbacco put it on the scale he used for weighing gold and exclaimed, "But Signore, this is worth ten times as much as the ring! Why would you want to make such a trade?"

Well, Honey, even though I was a mere girl at the time, I'd already heard some *merda* in my life. But never anything like the story Polo gave us.

As a young man (he said) he was traveling the Silk Road to Cathay when one day, as his caravan was crossing a great desert in Tartary, something strange began to emerge from the glare and dust and the flickering mirages.

At first it looked like a demon with many heads, and Polo hardly knew whether to draw his sword or his crucifix. But when it drew close he saw it was only a *bonze*, a Buddhist monk, riding on a Bactrian camel — the kind with two humps.

He showed Polo the amulet and offered to trade it for something ridiculous, a neck cloth or some such trifle. Of course Polo agreed, and as soon as they made the swap, the monk turned his camel's head and vanished back into the wasteland.

"That evening when we were making camp," Polo said, "I saw a pebble glinting in the rays of the setting sun. I picked it up and it was a huge

diamond! When we reached Cathay, Kubla Khan took an instant liking to me; he gave me gifts and showed me such favor that all the courtiers hastened to make friends with me."

Polo began to study Chinese, and soon he was able to read the marks on the amulet. For Sbacco and me he translated the meaning into Italian, but I can give you kind of an *inglese* version:

*Five hundred times the moon will bring
Two years of life, with every good thing.
But if to the charm you cling, alack!
The Tao will take everything back.*

Well, I've never cared much for nonsense, so I spoke up and said, "And what does *that* mean?"

"At first I didn't really know," he answered. "But I could see it promised good luck, and I was having the best luck of my life, so I hung onto the amulet."

After many years in Cathay, he returned to Italy, and became a famous man in Venice. Then his luck began to run out; the Genoese captured him and threw him into prison; he had to bribe his way out, losing most of the riches the Khan had given him. People joked about him behind his back, calling him Liar Polo and Signore Millione because he was always talking about the vastness and wealth of China. He wrote a book about his travels that everybody ridiculed, because it was full of nonsense — such as that the Chinese used paper for money, made a black powder that exploded, and burned rocks called "coal" in their fireplaces. Polo noticed that he was changing physically, too; after decades of looking younger than his years, he began to look his age, then older. So he began to calculate, and he realized that allowing twenty-nine days for each lunar month, he'd used up his five hundred moons and then some. Was that what the verse meant? Was the Tao — that means something like the nature of Nature — taking back everything it had given him?

He wanted badly to be rid of the amulet, but he was afraid just to throw it away. Perhaps there had to be an actual change of ownership. He knew the bonze had gotten rid of it by trading it for something of less value, so that was what he was attempting to do.

"This will make you rich, Signore *Orefice*," Polo told Giovanni. (That means goldsmith in Italian, Honey.) "But unlike me," he said, "you ought to get rid of the amulet before you lose everything you've gained. And now I'd like to have that ring — unless you want me to make the same offer to another goldsmith down the street."

Well, Honey, what would you expect us to say? Sbacco made the trade, and Polo walked out, and — but there, that's enough for today. It's 4:50, and just like Sheherazade I'm going to leave you dangling. Come again tomorrow, and *buona sera*!

Arriving for his second session with the Signora, Tim again made his way through the murky Antique Mall, with its tiny rented stalls featuring repro furniture, mutilated garden statuary, and shelves crowded with ghastly "collectibles." As usual in such places, none of the tenants seemed to be present. The bearded man — whose name turned out to be Theodore — kept watch over their wretched hoards from a rolltop desk, sitting amid a litter of sales slips and tomato-stained crusts from a demolished pizza.

"You havin' you a good talk with the ole lady?" he inquired.

"Well, uh, she's having a good talk with me."

"Yeah, she's a talker, her. Why you innerested in her, anyways?"

"I'm writing a book on the eccentrics of New Orleans."

"Wowee. That'll be some kinda fat book."

Tim shook his head. "That's what I figured, only it's not working out. Most eccentrics are bores — that's why they dress and act funny. But I think Signora Clara may be different."

"Take it from me," said Theodore, "that old broad is different from everybody."

The vast room upstairs was unchanged, except some piles of laundry had grown a tad higher. Signora Clara ate from the same (or maybe a new?) box of Godivas, wore similar fluorescent sleepwear, spoke in the same remote voice, gazed at Tim with the same tiny glinting eyes.

Feeling far less shy than the day before, Tim sat down, flicked on his recorder and said cheerfully, "I'm ready when you are."

"You like'a da story, huh?"

"Love it."

"Yeah, but you think it's a *stoltezza*, foolishness. Me, I know better."

But 'sokay, young guys always got hard heads. So sit back, ease you spine, and listen."

SIGNORA INTERVIEW DAY 2

Well, Honey, Polo had hardly left the shop when in walked a Moorish slave wearing the colors of the Doge of Venice!

He said the Doge needed a gold cup made quickly, threw a leather sack of ducats down on the *banco* and strutted away. Sbacco had never had such a commission before, and he began work in fear and trembling, because awful things could happen if the Doge wasn't satisfied. But he needn't have worried; it was like a spirit was guiding him!

He made a beautiful wax model of a cup with a dolphin handle, packed plaster around it and poured in molten gold, which burned out the wax and took its form. When it cooled he polished the gold until it looked like the noonday sun reflecting on the Grand Canal.

Nothing so fine had ever come from his clumsy hands. The Doge was delighted, and told his friends in the Senate and the Great Council that governed Venice, and everybody who was anybody began coming to our shop. Sbacco made more and more beautiful things, and so much money came his way that in a few years he was able to buy a palazzo and bribe his way into the Council.

Now he wanted to marry a rich woman, so we reached an agreement: I'd keep quiet about the amulet — in those days you could be burned for practicing magic — and in return he'd set me up in a comfortable house, with a handsome allowance. I think it's so nice when a relationship ends amicably, don't you?

He found a lady with a big dowry to marry, while I bought myself a young Russian slave named Sergei who'd been bound for the choir at San Marco but, thank heaven, hadn't been castrated yet. Then I sat back and enjoyed my life of leisure and watched my ugly little *orefice* from the Alley of the Assassins shoot up like a skyrocket.

Soon the same gossippers who used to talk about Liar Polo began talking about Lucky Sbacco. He got into trade — bought a shipload of barrel staves and sent it to Marseilles. Well, the French winemakers had a huge vintage that year and were short of barrels, and I think he made six

thousand percent on that deal alone. He made a handsome gift to the church, and when his wife presented him with healthy twin boys the Archbishop of Venice himself baptized them at the font in San Marco.

By the 1340s Sbacco owned many ships, and he sent them to Constantinople and Spain and the Black Sea coast, which was the western end of the Silk Road. In the Crimea his captains bought cloth from China and sables and ermines and slaves from Russia, and carried them all home to Venice. In time he was made a Senator, and people called him Senator Midas because everything he touched turned to gold.

Of course he'd forgotten what Polo had told him about the amulet so long ago. So had I, and Polo himself was dead by then, and who thinks about dead people, anyway?

Well, Honey, you know things don't stay perfect forever. The Tartars who'd conquered Russia decided to loot the Italian merchants in the Crimea. So they hopped on their shaggy little ponies and descended on the coastal towns and set up siege engines and bitter fighting began. Did I care? Honey, if somebody had told me there was a war on the moon I couldn't have cared less. I had a happy life in my palazzo with Sergei, who had passed beyond the boy-toy stage and matured enough to be truly interesting.

Then one day toward the end of January, 1348 — a cold, damp, nasty January as most of them are in Venice, because it's nothing but a mudbank in a salt marsh that happens to be covered with cathedrals and palaces — I was up in my bedroom, huddled under a pile of furs by a brazier that was giving off much more smoke than heat.

I'd sent Sergei to the fishmarket to buy a bucket of those lovely little Adriatic cuttlefish, the ones with the bright orange mantles, and I was dreaming of mulled wine and a nice spicy stew of *frutti di mare* to warm me up, when somebody began to pound the big knocker on the door down below.

I heard the servants draw the bolts, and then a voice that was strange yet somehow familiar — the voice of somebody I'd known long, long ago. Feet came pounding up the stairs, and Sbacco rushed into the room and fell on his knees beside my bed. His eyes were staring and his face was gaunt and he gasped out, "Dead! Dead! They're all dead!"

And there, Honey, that's enough of that. If I don't leave you hanging, how do I know you'll come back? So *buona sera* to you, young guy!

Theodore was becoming friendlier. When Tim passed his desk, he rose and strolled into the street with him, chatting in his blue-collar Yat accent.

There a hoarse voice spoke up from the region of their belt buckles. "Spare change, mister?"

Harry the beggar was squatting in his means of locomotion, a kind of tray on wheels. His thick, muscular hands held two worn blocks of wood that he used to row himself around the paving stones.

"Harry," said Theodore, "you know I don't like when you panhandle in fronta my doorway."

"Don't I gotta oin my livin' too? How about it, sir?"

Tim emptied his left pocket into Harry's hand. Harry gave him another small blue card, said, "God bless," and rowed away.

"That only encourages the goddamn knuckle dancer," grouched Theodore. "At night he prolly puts on a couple thousand-dollar legs and goes joggin'."

"See you," said Tim, heading toward his battered Civic.

"Tomorra," said Theodore.

Harry's card said *It is more blessed to give than to receive*. Tim dropped it in the gutter and drove over it as he headed home.

On the third day, the big room remained full of peaceful brown shadows and the fragrance of costly chocolate.

Tim's *culo* — he'd finally figured out that the word meant ass — got numb on the same small gilt chair; his elderly voice-activated recorder spun its spindles like Nemesis unwinding the thread of Fate.

"So, lemme see," the Signora buzzed. "Where was I? I remember I'd just said sump'm thrilling —"

"Dead, dead, they're all dead!" Tim reminded her.

"Oh, yeah. Right. Well, see, like I said, I pride myself on tryin'a be sensible, so —"

SIGNORA INTERVIEW DAY 3

I pride myself on trying to be sensible, so I sat up and took Sbacco's ugly old head on my lap and said, "Now, *caro*, that can't be literally true, can it? Who's dead?"

He sobbed, "My wife and my sons and my captain and everybody."

I ordered mulled wine, and Sbacco drank a cup or two and became more coherent, though not a bit happier. This was his story: two of his ships had been loading at a Black Sea port called Caffa when the Tartars arrived. The Italians fought back, and after a few weeks they could see that the enemy was weakening, so they thought that soon the barbarians would ride away and leave them in peace.

Then the Tartars loaded a corpse onto a catapult, and it came flying over the wall, spinning like a whirligig in midair and landing with a *thump!* The body had big oozing lumps in the groin and armpits, and the skin was all mottled with black splotches that our men thought were bruises. Everybody made jokes about the dim-witted barbarians, trying to knock down walls with bodies. But then more corpses came flying, and to me the whole story sounded ghastly but also somehow comic, you know? I mean — oops, here comes another one!

Well, the defenders threw the corpses into pits and covered them up so they wouldn't stink, but then — ah, then —

"They started to get sick," interjected Tim..

"*Caro mio*, you some kinda bright kid."

"Thirteen forty-eight... Yeah... yeah... the five hundred moons were up, more or less."

"Honey, wasn't no more and less about it. Da time *was* up. For all of us."

You see, lots of caravans had been traveling the Silk Road, and when plague broke out in China, they brought it west along with the trade goods.

They carried food, and rats crawled into the saddlebags and the rats had fleas, and some of the fleas — though of course nobody knew it back in those days — carried the Black Death. And when the sickness broke out among the Tartars, they decided to share it, wasn't that nice of them?

When the Italians realized what was happening, they jumped into their ships and sailed away, taking the plague with them. Sbacco's captain was already dying when he staggered into the palazzo with the news, and the rich wife died, and the twin boys — young men by that time, and a lot better looking than their Papa — they died, too. *Che sciagura!*

That was when Sbacco came running back to his long-ago love for comfort, and he brought the plague into my house. He died the very next day, and my nice Sergei had one last tasty meal of stewed cuttlefish before he died. And the servants all ran away — the cowards — not that it did them any good, for they all died too.

And there I was, Clara Portofino, a — well, by this time a ripe lady of fifty-four — all alone in a plague-stricken city. Sbacco's last act was to give me the amulet in exchange for a good-bye kiss, so my five hundred moons of good luck began — and let me tell you, Honey, I needed all the luck I could get!

My first thought was to get out of Venice. So I sewed the amulet and all my jewels into my rattiest old traveling cloak, went to a convent attached to San Marco and bribed the porter to steal me a nun's habit. I wanted, you see, to look as poor and at the same time as untouchable as possible.

I cut off my long dark hair, put on the habit (and it was quite becoming, in an austere sort of way), wrapped a big rosary around my waist, threw the cloak over my shoulders and set out. I bribed a boatmen — we didn't have gondolas yet back then, just flat-bottomed scows like Cajun pirogues — to take me to Mestre on the mainland.

But when we arrived, the first thing I saw was a column of greasy black smoke, and I heard screaming. The city fathers were burning some gravediggers they accused of spreading the plague to drum up business. We humans are rather an awful species when we get scared, and everybody was scared then, which was only natural, considering that in the course of a few years a third of the world died. So I thought I'd better move on before they found out I'd come from a plague-stricken house, and burned me, too.

I called myself Sister Clara di San Marco, and I was able to talk myself into the coach of a noblewoman, Euphemia Something. She was a senator's widow or an admiral's, or whatever, and she was a remarkably stupid and cowardly woman who imagined that having a holy nun like me along might bring her good luck. Big mistake!

The coach had only leather springs and rolled like a boat in a storm, and I hardly had room to sit because of the crucifixes and icons and the gold and silver boxes with saints' relics piled up around Euphemia. I had to

listen to the story of each and every one — how this box contained the toenails of St. Mark, and that one the little finger of Saint Gertrude, and so on. But I also learned something practical: a cousin of hers, a certain Duke Alberigo, had withdrawn with some friends to a castle to escape the plague. That was where we were headed.

Well, we had a dreadful journey. Our coachman died, and I had to change my nun's habit for his smelly old clothes and climb onto the box and manage the horses. Then Euphemia died, notwithstanding all her toenails and fingerbones. I dragged her out on the roadside, whipped up the horses and began to climb into the foothills of the Dolomites, following the directions she'd given me. And in time I arrived at a charming castle standing on a rocky pinnacle, with the loveliest view over a valley where the little silver River Piave was breaking through the ice and beginning to flow.

The gates were shut, of course, and I could see armed guards posted in the towers. So I turned myself back into a holy sister and approached the castle, fell on my knees and begged for sanctuary. And once more the amulet began to work!

And say, *caro*, once more it's getting late. So the time is up for today. It's good fun, reminiscing about olden times with a nice young guy to listen to me and look interested. *Buona sera*, and come again.

Fourth afternoon: the supply of chocolates was infinite. The piles of laundry had grown still higher. The Signora's voice buzzed from some infinite distance. Tim found himself inventing ornate phrases (*as if echoing from the depths of the well of Time*) and jotting them down in a small notebook as gilded frames to her Brueghelesque word pictures. Only today Brueghel began to verge on Hieronymus Bosch, as the Signora developed her own strange angle on the greatest calamity ever to strike the disaster-prone human race.

SIGNORA INTERVIEW DAY 4

A big portly man in rich attire showed up on the battlements. It was Duke Alberigo, and he wanted news of Venice and the plague, so I gave him quite a vivid account.

He asked how I had survived, and I answered solemnly, "My Mother Superior entrusted me with many wonder-working relics, and they brought me through unharmed when everyone else died!"

Well, he was so impressed that he said I could enter his castle, and how charming it was! It was called the *Torre di Grazia*, the Tower of Grace, and Duke Alberigo had his duchess there, and a couple of mistresses, and a hundred of his closest friends, and a good cook, and his dogs and jester, and a troupe of acrobats and jongleurs, and his private physician, and a poet who spent all day writing sonnets in his praise, and a bunch of serfs to do the heavy work, and some men at arms and his favorite torturer to keep order.

He'd brought along a couple of dozen tuns of wine, and the courtyard was kind of a Noah's Ark with pens for pigs and chickens and cows to keep the kitchen supplied. Against one wall stood a gibbet all ready for business, just in case anybody got seriously out of line.

It was noisy and smelly in the Tower of Grace, but so much fun — nice-looking men and women wearing silks and furs, music and dancing every night, and lots to eat and a fire always roaring in the great hall. Unfortunately I had to act like a nun, so I couldn't do anything naughty, but after my flight from a plague-stricken city it felt so wonderful just to relax and enjoy life. Of course, it didn't last.

See, Honey, the problem was the cloak. It had more in it than jewels and the amulet. The plague had been in my house and some of the fleas went with me. And yeah, sure I itched, but so what? In those days everybody from the Pope on down had fleas and lice and itched all the time. So I thought nothing of it.

But looking back, I can see that without the amulet I'd have died a hundred times over. I can see why the coachman died, also Euphemia. And now it was Duke Alberigo's turn, and after that — all Europe!

"All Europe?" interjected Tim. "Uh, uh, uh, uh —"

"Yeah, Honey, alla Europe. Now you just sit back anna stay quiet, OK? This is my story. And what happened was —"

What happened was that one night, just as the entertainment was beginning, the Duke's jester fell down in the middle of making an atrocious

pun. He was a dwarf with a big shiny head like Danny DeVito, and so lively and so much fun that seeing him drop like a stone was — well, stupefying.

We were all in the great hall of the castle, and I'd just swallowed a particularly luscious chunk of roast pork. I was eyeing a young man-at-arms who had the most attractive legs, and regretting once again that I'd made myself up as a nun. And then the jester hit the floor.

Well, at first everybody thought it was part of the act. But then his face started turning black, and panic set in. Everybody began screaming and running, knocking over the tables, frightening the dogs that barked and howled and ran around too.

I shook with fright, for I realized that when they got over the first shock I'd be in deep *merda*. Nobody had entered the castle recently except me, and the Duke — who was nobody's fool — would soon realize I must be the source of the plague. I thought of the torturer and the gibbet in the courtyard, and I knew I'd have to hit the road again.

And that, Honey, turned out to be bad for me, but much worse for everybody else, because I carried the plague with me, and — oops — time's up! And *buona sera!*

That night in the slum bed-sitter which was all the absolute unsuccess of his writing career to date allowed him, Tim listened to his tapes while eating raisin bran and a banana, which was all he allowed himself on Thursdays. He decided that, mad though she might be, Signora Clara Donà was his patroness. Duck lady, shmuck lady. There was about the Signora's fantasy a range and opulence that threw all the other weirdos of his acquaintance into the shade.

He decided to call his book *Our Lady of the Black Death and Other Eccentrics of New Orleans*. Her story would be the jewel in the crown, the floral centerpiece, the ne plus ultra of nuttiness that would give his work distinction, uniqueness, and (he hoped) a respectable sale.

Then to quiet his hunger pangs, he opened his futon, fell asleep, and dreamed of a nine-course dinner at which he received the Pulitzer Prize.

On the fifth and last day, Tim nodded casually to Theodore, took the circular stairs two at a time, and arrived smiling and a bit dizzy in the unchanging room where his fat old Sheherazade awaited him.

"So, *caro*, you enjoyin' yourself?" she asked, popping a chocolate.

"Sure am. You were going to tell me how you spread the Black Death."

"You betcha. And it useta bother me, too. But hell, fate — it'sa hard to avoid, y'unnerstand what I'ma sayin'?"

SIGNORA INTERVIEW DAY 5

Anyway, I snatched up my cloak with the amulet and jewels in it, and took advantage of all the uproar to escape through a postern gate that had been left unguarded.

At the stables I stole a mare who seemed quite confused by the whole business, jumped on her and rode off bareback because I didn't have time to saddle her.

Now, Honey, if you think the Alps are warm and toasty that time of year, let me tell you they're not. I crossed the Brenner Pass in a spring snowstorm, trotted through Salzburg, and after many weary days reached Vienna. The plague wasn't there yet, and everything looked wonderful, with new leaves breaking out and little birds starting to sing.

My hair had grown back, so I pitched the nun's habit, bought some decent clothes, and set out to enjoy myself for a change. One Sunday I was at Mass in St. Stephen's Cathedral, which I'd found was a marvelous place to catch the eye of lively young men. Strange as it seemed, even to me, I appeared much younger than I had a few months before. I'd taken my jewels out of my cloak and was wearing them, and I must have looked like a gigolo's dream of heaven.

And then — just as I was exchanging the most X-rated glances with a greasy young fellow wearing domino tights — the priest on the altar suddenly staggered and fell down!

People started screaming, and that huge church emptied out in roughly three minutes, all except some groaning worshippers who'd gotten trampled. I hid behind a pillar until the stampede was over, then made my way back to my lodgings.

I'd already seen what happened to anyone accused of carrying the plague. Lucky if they just burned you — often the red-hot pincers came first! I could see that once again I'd better be going, so I sold a small

emerald to buy a coach and horses, hired a driver, and headed north again.

Well, Honey, I could tell you quite some stories — how I reached Paris, and the plague broke out there; how I fled to London, and the plague broke out there; how I took a ship to the German coast, and ditto, ditto; how I struggled on to Denmark, then to Sweden, and then to a hideous bunch of log cabins called Moscow. And everywhere the Black Death seemed to follow me!

I floated down the Volga on the barge of a fur trader, past Tsaritsyn — just a big colorful Tartar encampment then, about six hundred years short of being renamed Stalingrad — and for the first time in a long time I began to feel safe. Lots of the Tartars had died, of course, but quite a few had survived and while northern Europe was in the first throes of the calamity, down along the Volga and the Black Sea life was beginning to lurch back toward normal.

My fur trader died, so I sold his cargo and sailed to Constantinople and there, too, life was beginning to revive. I had myself rowed across the Golden Horn to the Italian quarter in Galata, and — *O, che bello suono!* — what a joy to hear my own language again!

I passed for a Venetian trader's widow, and with so many other widows and widowers and orphans around, the story must have seemed quite believable. I spent a couple of years buying and selling and trading in the bazaars, and everything I touched turned to money, just as it had for Polo and Sbacco, in what seemed another life I'd lived a long, long time ago. At some point I ditched the cloak that had caused all the trouble — not that it mattered much then, because everyone in Galata who was still alive had acquired immunity to the plague.

Eventually I returned to Venice, where I lived in peace and joy and happiness until my five hundred moons were over. By then I'd used up about a dozen more lovers and a husband or two, and I'd passed the century mark, but — amazingly — looked younger than ever, except for growing a great big *culo* that might actually have added to my charms.

My current lover was a boy I'd nicknamed *il spettacolo*, on account of his physical endowments, and in 1397 I gave him the amulet in return for a lock of his curly black hair as a keepsake. He was a sweet boy, so I explained the secret over and over, and made him repeat it after me. By

then I'd figured out the ultimate meaning of the verse, you see: that each lunar month you held the amulet, up to five hundred, gave you not only good luck but two years of life as well. In all, a thousand years!

But if you got greedy and kept it too long, you lost everything, because that's the way the universe is, Honey. It gives, but always on its own terms, and if you mess around, it takes everything back. *Santo cielo*, does it take back!

When his five hundred moons were up, Spettacolo remembered what I'd told him and gave the amulet to a Milanese hooker in exchange for a blowjob. As a result, he had a long life, too — just died last year, as a matter of fact, while skiing at Gstaad. Such a silly thing for a man his age to do, which just goes to show that the guarantee of life isn't absolute. If you act like a fool, you still can die before your time: no magic ever made can save you from your own stupidity.

Well, his hooker became Duchess of Milan, but like most of her profession she was greedy and failed to get rid of the amulet in time. So the *merda* started up again. The duke of Milan — he was a Visconti, Honey, and you didn't mess around with the Viscontis — caught her in bed with a lackey, and had them both boiled in oil. The amulet disappeared for a generation, then turned up in the hands of Giulio de' Medici. He became Pope Clement VII, and I know he didn't get rid of it in time, because in 1527 a bunch of mercenary soldiers descended on Rome and sacked it much more thoroughly than the Goths and the Vandals had ever done.

Clement died in shame and misery, and on his deathbed a Spanish cardinal wrenched the amulet from his grasp. Then for centuries it went from hand to hand among people who knew nothing about the charm. Some of them didn't hold it long enough, and so missed out on centuries of life; others held it too long, and wound up deep in the old familiar. An English pirate looted it from a Spanish galleon, and gave it to Queen Elizabeth I to win her favor. She had forty years of glory, then lost all her hair and died leaving her kingdom to the son of the woman she hated most, Mary, Queen of Scots. Oh, but she died bitter — old bald Liz!

King James gave it to his eight-year-old son Charlie as a good luck piece, and forty-one years later Charlie had his head chopped off by Oliver Cromwell! The amulet disappeared for over a century, then turned up in the hands of Mayer Rothschild as security for a loan. He presented it to

Catherine the Great, who gave it to Voltaire for groveling to her in his books. He became rich and famous, then died a horrible death.

Well, Honey, the French Revolution broke out and I could see big trouble coming in Europe. So I emigrated to New York, having seen enough *merda* in my time and no urge to see any more. And as for the amulet, well, I thought, that's it, I'll never lay eyes on the damn thing again. For a while I suspected Napoleon of having it — I mean, he shot up like a skyrocket, and whoever heard of a Corsican amounting to anything? But in that I was wrong.

New York was the American capital then, and one spring morning when I was out on the Battery taking the air, who should I see strolling by but big, heavy old President Washington? He was lumbering along with his cane tapping and his wooden false teeth clicking and his diamond-buckle shoes squeaking, and with him was a tall, skinny, freckled fellow who caught my eye because — unlike all the other gentlemen on the Battery — he wasn't wearing a powdered wig. And as I watched, quite casually he took the amulet out of his waistcoat pocket and showed it to the president!

Well, my dear, I almost dropped. Now what was his name — I'm having a senior moment — a Virginian with a *latte* mistress and a bunch of charming little colored children —

"Thomas Jefferson?" Tim ventured.

"Bingo!" she cried. "*Sì, of corsa, da Jefferson!*"

He must have got hold of the amulet when he was *ambasciatore* to France. Maybe bought it from Voltaire's estate as a curio — Jefferson was crazy for curios.

Well, suppose you figure from 1785, when he was in Paris, to 1826 when he died. He lived like a Renaissance prince, all the while passing himself off as a democrat. He became President twice, lucked into the Louisiana Purchase, and kept on making *bambini* at a time of life when most men can't get their hopes up, much less anything else. And then, when his time was over, he lost all his money, had to sell his slaves, and died broke!

When Jefferson's goods were auctioned off, a Yankee peddler who traveled the backroads bought the amulet and sold it to a rich Kentucky

slaveowner named Todd. He gave it to his little girl Mary one day to stop her from crying, and she kept it her whole life long. Big mistake! In forty years — with some help from her husband, Abe Lincoln — she went from the backwoods to the White House, and right afterwards from the White House to the madhouse!

All at once the torrent stopped. The tape ran out and the recorder gave an apologetic beep.

The Signora's little pinprick eyes glinted. Expectancy filled the air until — as he was supposed to — Tim asked, "And after that?"

"It disappeared again. But just lately it'sa showed up!"

"You know where it is?"

"Sì. And it'sa for sale. And whatever you pay for it, it'll be cheap. You book'll sell by da truckload. And because I told you da secret, you can get rid of it in time. As long as you don't act dumb, you can live inna comfort for a thousand years!"

Tim had a sinking feeling. The Signora had offered him her story with no hint of compensation, and it was a bit late in the game to be conning him now.

"I uh, uh, think I'll pass on it," he muttered.

"You got some kinda hard head, you! Well, I'ma gonna make you rich whether or no. If you don't buy da amulet, you canna use my story in you book."

Suddenly Tim knew what a checkmated King feels like. "Well, I uh, uh, uh, guess I could look. Where is it?"

"Downstairs, *naturalmente*. Aska da Tay-oh-dor to show it to you."

As Tim lurched down the circular staircase, wondering if its shape might symbolize the descending spiral of his life, he heard her call out gaily, "And *buona sera*, young guy! Come back anna see me innabout twenty-one hundred!"

Theodore sat as usual at his dusty roll-top desk. When Tim asked him about the amulet, he grunted resentfully.

"That piece a crap!" he sniffed. "The old lady seen it in a auction catalogue and got a cute fruit rents one of the stalls to buy it. Then erl come in on some swampland he owns, and I ain't seen him sincet. Here, I'll show it to you."

He led the way through the shadows to a display offering (among other things) classic Coke bottles, a headless Barbie, a plaster Disney dwarf portraying Sleazy or Queasy, and a badly foxed copy of a book called *Fun and Games in the Dark Ages*.

Theodore scrabbled around in a tray of dubious-looking gewgaws and pulled out a tarnished disc about three inches across.

"Huh," he said. "Foist time I ever picked it up. It's real heavy. Prolly gold-washed lead."

He handed it to Tim casually, like a tip to a bellboy, and Tim gazed at the small incised Chinese characters, thinking of many things — of the hooded monk and Marco Polo and the Black Death and Elizabeth of England and Catherine of Russia and Thomas Jefferson and Mary Todd Lincoln — and, above all, just how deeply and painfully he was about to get screwed.

"So, you wannit or what?"

Tim released a sigh of resignation. "I uh, uh, guess so. How much?"

"Lessee, he's got the price marked. That'll be eight fifty."

Tim swallowed hard. Eight hundred and fifty dollars!

"I'll have to go home and get my uh, uh, checkbook," he said miserably, knowing well that his credit card was maxed out and that his current bank balance was \$927.14.

"Oh hell," said Theodore, "I don't owe that asshole no favors. Just gimme eight bucks and we'll call it square."

In a dream Tim extracted a five and three ones from his wallet and turned them over.

"So, you wannit gift wrapped?" asked Theodore.

Tim said no and headed for the door. As he emerged, a voice spoke up from the vicinity of his belt buckle. "Spare change, my friend?"

Tim stared for a moment, then extended his hand and gently placed the amulet in Harry's left paw.

"Hang onto it," he smiled. "It'll bring you uh, uh, uh, luck."

The beggar said doubtfully, "God bless," but gave him the usual small blue card before rowing himself away. The card said *Generosity Is the Best Policy*.

Then Tim, treading on air, headed home to his slum apartment to work on his book which, when it came out the following year, sold exactly

fifty-seven copies. The only review, in the *Times-Picayune*, chastised Tim for his mocking treatment of the Duck Lady, a beloved local character, and for spending so much time on an incomprehensible story about an amulet.

After that, Tim went to work for a vinyl-siding company and disappeared from human history.

One late summer afternoon, Theodore was standing outside the Trash & Treasures Antique Mall, stroking his beard, when a white stretch limo glided to the curb like a snowy owl alighting.

A blue window in back retracted and somebody inside beckoned. Curious, Theodore approached and bowed his head.

Harry was seated in comfort, a large whiskey in hand, his legs (*legs!!*), clad in Brooks Brothers slacks, stretching into the ample space under the burled-walnut wet bar. A busty blonde sat beside him, eyes glued to a color television embedded in the back of the chauffeur's seat. The program was *Wheel of Fortune*.

"Where y'at?" asked Harry. He popped a foot-long Cuban cigar into his mouth and rolled it around. "Say, you see anything of that young guy used to gimme money?"

"No," said Theodore, after a moment devoted to gawking. "His book flopped and I ain't seen him sincet."

"Too bad. He was a generous guy. I figured I'd lay a C-note on him account of all the loose change he gimme, back when I was poor."

"You look like you doin' good now, Harry."

"Yeah, my luck finally toined. Well, that's how it should be. I seen a lot of crap in my life."

He waved ta-ta and touched a button. Just as the window was sliding shut, Theodore said, "You enjoy it while you can."





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

Reflex, by Steven Gould, Tor Books, 2004, \$24.95.

I WAS quite taken with a couple of Gould's earlier novels, *Jumper* and *Wildside*, but somehow lost track of him over the years. He writes (at least he does in the three books I've read so far) entertaining but thoughtful sf set in the near future, usually taking one neat idea and running with it. What I particularly enjoy about his work is how, beyond the initial premise, the novels aren't particularly far-fetched. We believe in these characters and take pleasure in the joy with which they use their discoveries.

Because that's something else I enjoy about these books. For all the story tension and drama, there's a huge positive streak running underneath it all.

Jumper is about a teen who discovers he has the ability to teleport, while in *Wildside*, the main

character discovers a portal into another world identical to our own, only minus the people (sort of reminiscent of S. M. Stirling's *Conquistador* but with an ordinary people can-do spirit, rather than a military bent).

Enjoying those earlier books as much as I did, I couldn't resist the new one, which is a sequel to *Jumper*. And it turns out Gould hasn't lost one bit of his touch. *Reflex* is a somewhat darker story than *Jumper*, but the characters are older, the world is more complicated, and it all makes sense in context.

That said, Gould's characters haven't lost their optimism and *joie de vivre*, though they're hard-pressed to maintain it at times.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Reflex opens with Davy Rice using his teleportation abilities to help out the U.S. government from time to time. He's called in for one of his infrequent assignments, but is kidnapped along the way by

people who know of his abilities. They've figured out how to nullify them with an implanted radio receiver that makes him violently ill every time he gets beyond the "safety field" of their machines — so ill that he collapses, helpless, weak, and very, very sick. Once they finish brainwashing him, they plan to use his abilities to further their own ends.

Now, so far in the history of this alternate world Gould has given us (in which the only difference is Davy's ability to teleport), there has never been a single record of another person being able to do it. But it turns out that if you've been carried along often enough on one of his placement jumps (as has his wife Millie), you might gain the ability as well.

In a moment of danger, Millie teleports herself to safety. With her new ability, and if she can learn to use it properly, she just might be able to find and rescue Davy. Unfortunately, not only does she have to deal with whoever has kidnapped him (and they are seriously nasty), but there are also elements in the government agency that employed Davy who are more eager to get their hands on her than to help her husband.

This is a fun, fast-paced novel

that — like Gould's other books — also has a social conscience that gives it more depth than such a story might have in lesser hands.

You don't need to have read *Jumper* to enjoy the new novel, but all three of the books mentioned here are highly recommended. And as I write those words, I realize that I should really go out and track down the books of his that I'm missing.

The Spiderwick Chronicles, Book 5: The Wrath of Mulgarath, by Tony DiTerlizzi & Holly Black, Simon & Schuster, 2004, \$9.95.

Warning: spoilers ahead.

And so the Spiderwick books come to an end...or do they? There's a hint of more to come in the verses at the end of the book ("So keep your eyes open/And when you see it, do choose it....") which might mean more adventures featuring the three Grace children (and possibly their mother and Lucinda, since they're both in on the truth now), or perhaps DiTerlizzi and Black are planning to put out a version of the field guide that started this whole business in Book One.

How does this series end? Well, there's a great deal going on, that's for sure. The children have to rescue their mother from Mulgarath,

the Goblin King who has set up shop in a nearby junkyard. Naturally, they're horribly outnumbered, but I don't suppose I'm really spoiling any surprises by saying that they prevail.

I was a little disappointed in this final volume. The story's fine, but I didn't find much character growth, which was disappointing. Considering how much had to befit in this last volume, that's not so surprising, I suppose.

But the illustrations are still charming, and if you're looking for spirited YA adventure that moves along at a happy clip and plays with all the fairy elements brought up in the previous books, you won't be disappointed.

Given the depth of Black's *Tithe*, I was just expecting more. But since the series delivers exactly what this sort of book promises it will, I don't have any real cause for complaint.

From A to Zine: Building a Winning Zine Collection in Your Library, by Julie Bartel, ALA Editions, 2004, \$35.

This might seem like an odd title to cover in this column, but I know from my mail that a lot of librarians read these monthly in-

stallments, and the book covers a subject dear to my heart, so I'm taking the liberty of using a few column inches to mention it.

Bartel starts off her book with a good working definition of a zine (for those of you who might not have a clue as to what's being discussed here):

"Zines (pronounced 'zeen,' like 'bean,' rather than 'line') are basically small, self-published magazines that are usually (though not always) written by one person and distributed through an intricate network of individuals and collectives. The only thing that all zines have in common is that their existence is the result of passion rather than a desire for profit."

And they can be about anything.

Zines might seem like a throwback to an earlier time in these days when anybody can put up a Web page or a blog and ramble on to their heart's content about any subject under the sun. But some of us still like the feel of paper in our hands and the slapdash punky look that was the trademark of many zines. (I know, I know — I'm forever going on about e-books, but while they're convenient, and I continue to read that format, they'll never be as much fun.)

The first zines I collected were mimeographed. When photocopying arrived it was just a marvel. And then came desktop publishing and the self-publishing world changed forever...not always for the better, I can hear some punters complain.

But I love them, the good and the bad.

I was never a convention-goer when I first got interested in fantasy and sf, so my way of being connected to the community (which also entailed following all the ongoing arguments and feuds therein) was through zines. My bible was the opinionated but always informative *SF Review* in its various incarnations.

I've also been a music junkie forever, especially of alternative musics that don't normally get much coverage in the regular music press, so zines proved invaluable for my finding out about new recordings and groups I might like, as well as letting me obsess on ones that I already did.

So there you have my bias.

Now what I like so much about Bartel's book (besides how it reminds me of all those smudgy mimeographed zines that used to show up in my P.O. box) is first, the idea of this art form being taken seriously, and second, the chance that

From A to Zine might start other collections in other libraries.

Bartel is based in the Salt Lake City Library, and the collection there is formidable and inspiring. But that's only one library, and there are many cities in the world and many potential readers out there who aren't aware yet that they need access to zines, but will quickly become enamored with them once they do discover a library carrying them.

From A to Zine gives a short history of zines and explains how to acquire and store them. The book is chock-full of resource material, everything from how to start up and distribute your own zine to contact info on the zines discussed and considerations on intellectual freedom.

Bartel has a wonderful breezy prose style that never sacrifices content. Like a zine, her writing bubbles with enthusiasm, wit, and the wealth of her knowledge in this field.

You can order copies directly from the American Library Association by contacting them at either (866) 746-7252, or www.alastore.ala.org.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. ☞



BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

The Evolution of the Weird Tale, by S. T. Joshi, Hippocampus Press, 2004, \$15.

H. G. Wells: Traversing Time, by W. Warren Wagar, Wesleyan University Press, 2004, \$34.95.

Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction, by Jonathan R. Eller and William F. Touponce, Kent State University Press, 2004, \$34.

Conversations with Ray Bradbury, edited by Steven L. Aggelis, University Press of Mississippi, 2004, \$48 hc, \$20 trpb.

LAST weekend as I sat listening to a fine guitarist, a man bent close to me and said what I first took to be "jam." Confused, I looked up at his straw hat, unruly hair, four-day stubble. An invitation? Offer of breakfast? Quote from *Alice*? Slowly I realized: this was a musician with

whom I've played on several occasions, and he was saying, not *jam*, but my name. Shaking hands, I told him I hadn't recognized him. "I know, I know, I'm reinventing myself," he said.

"Be sure to apply for the patent," I cautioned.

Today I'm thinking how many times sf has reinvented itself in the years I've been reading it, and what in all that time has remained solid and forever recognizable at its heart. What its patent covers.

I came up in the cusp, traces of the old pulp still much in evidence, *Galaxy* and *F&SF* transforming the field, major figures like Sturgeon, Heinlein, and Leiber still writing. Years later, a writer myself, I'd form enduring friendships with many writers, new wave and old school, and as editor of *New Worlds*, alongside Ballard's and Aldiss's work would publish *Bug Jack Barron*, "Time Considered as a Helix of Semiprecious Stones," and "A Boy and His Dog."

Meanwhile, out there, outside the circus tent, sf was busily changing hats, mugging, and quite possibly having false papers drawn up for travel....

This past year I've donned a new hat myself, as teacher. There's nothing like teaching to bring you to verbalize and question concepts long taken for granted, and in speaking about science fiction week after week, its history, its current writers, how one writes it and the many pitfalls of doing so, I've come anew to wonder at science fiction's place both in literature and in popular culture.

Many of my concerns and self-interrogations are reflected in the latest crop of books not of, but about, science fiction.

Well-known as the editor of major collections of supernatural stories by Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen and others, for *The Weird Tale* (1990), and for biographies of Lord Dunsany and Lovecraft, S. T. Joshi has not taken over a critical niche so much as he has created one — built the chair from scratch, as it were. And though he's a great fan of the golden period of supernatural fiction, which he sets at 1880-1940, his reading ranges widely, as the chapters here, run-

ning from Robert W. Chambers and W. C. Morrow to Rudyard Kipling, Frank Belknap Long, and splatterpunk, demonstrate.

Despite its title, *The Evolution of the Weird Tale* is a miscellany, collecting reviews from such specialty publications as *Studies in Weird Fiction*, *American Supernatural Fiction*, and *Necrofile*, and introductions penned for the various collections Joshi has edited. The critic, he holds, occupies a central function in the establishment of a literary canon, both as antidote to popular appeal and as arbiter of taste. "My critical method is explicitly judgmental, as I consider it an essential component of the critic's function to pass an informed judgment upon the merits or demerits of a given work of literature, or of the author's work as a whole."

Canonization of the weird tale seems clearly what Joshi aims for, nor can one doubt his high ideals and expectations. Yet, while I suspect that Joshi would refuse even at gunpoint to admit that all is, finally, a matter of taste, his work here abounds with personal opinion often poorly supported by accompanying argument and excerpt. He is at his best in the introductions, laying out the arc of a writer's career, giving it form, illuminating

the whole and shining light into odd corners. Sections on Fritz Leiber, Lovecraft, and Dennis Etchison are of considerable interest. Less rewarding, and indeed questionable, are those on Rod Serling — influential, yes, but finally the author of simplistic moral tales — and Poppy Z. Brite, a fine, complex writer for whom Joshi seems to have a distinct and unfounded distaste.

One of the great pleasures of reading biography, criticism, and literary journalism lies in coming across books that allow us to rediscover familiar writers: to discover how much our "familiarity" derives from assumption, hearsay, and misremembering, to learn how little we actually knew, and to see these writers afresh.

H. G. Wells: Traversing Time is such a book, not "a volume of meticulous literary criticism" (as its author states in the prologue) but more an extended essay, a personal tribute to "the work and thought of the human being who has done more than any other to illuminate the world for me — and, I suspect, for thousands of others." W. Warren Wagar has published widely on Wells, including three earlier books. "I have devoted the greater part of my life to the study

of H. G. Wells and to explorations of the human prospect in a Wellsian spirit," he tells us in the book's concluding personal epilogue.

Quite aside from being the father of modern science fiction, Wells was for at least two decades the most popular of British mainstream novelists. His work was greatly anticipated and widely, fervently discussed. *The Outline of History* sold millions of copies. Working simultaneously as romancer, mainstream literary novelist, and social philosopher, Wells published thousands of articles in newspapers and magazines, and at least 113 books. His lifetime ran from one year after the close of the U.S. Civil War to one year after World War II's end, "the astonishing span from cannonballs to atomic bombs," and every reverberation of the immense changes taking place in the world about him, every tremor, every seizure, surfaces in Wells's work.

"It would be difficult," Wagar writes, "to imagine another major literary figure of his generation so intensely conscious of human life on Earth as a process of change over long periods of time, both historical and geological, both past and future." Rooted securely in the chief intellectual concerns of his own time — socialism, world govern-

ment, the role of science, imperialism – Wells's work seems on the one hand very much of his day and on the other, timeless.

One element that sets speculative fiction apart from most other fiction is its insistence upon not only depicting human life but also placing a frame around mankind's place in the universe, something virtually all Wells's books accomplish to great effect. And if art's purpose is to lift us out of the dailiness of our lives and make us see things anew, to direct us toward true vision, then his is high art indeed.

Wagar gives us an affectionate and wonderfully readable portrait of Wells, this man ever impatient with the present, who wanted "to go ahead of Father Time with a scythe of my own."

Some artists have a presence so pervasive that we take them wholly for granted; they're the floor we walk on.

Ray Bradbury, for instance.

Like many of my era, I grew up on this man's work, marveling at *The Martian Chronicles* not long after its 1950 publication, poring over *The October Country* in its original Ballantine edition, later, as a fledgling writer, poking at stories

like "The Wind," "The Pedestrian," "The Veldt," and "The Homecoming" to try to see how he did it, where the magic came from.

As Harlan Ellison wrote in *Again, Dangerous Visions*, "I mean come on...can you ever really forget that thing that called to the foghorn from the sea? Can you really forget Uncle Einar? Can you put out of your mind all the black folk leaving for Mars....Can you forget Parkhill in '—And the Moon Be Still as Bright' doing target practice in one of the dead Martian cities, 'shooting out the crystal windows and blowing the tops off the fragile towers'?"

Or the house in "There Will Come Soft Rains," going on about its business long after its occupants are extinct: preparing meals, clearing the table and cleaning itself, at last trying to put out the fire that takes its own life, one wall left standing, reciting a Sara Teasdale poem.

"There aren't many guys in our game who've given us so many treasureable memories," Harlan remarks, and over the past few months, in teaching science fiction, I've had the opportunity to return to many of those treasured moments.

Ray Bradbury: The Life of Fiction presents itself as "the first attempt to bring textual criticism

to bear in an in-depth study of Ray Bradbury's authorship." Clearly the book's aim is high, intentions all to the good. And there's no doubt that it's well past time for serious study of Bradbury's work. But just as clearly, the book (570 pages, 128 of them devoted to critical apparatus) is intended for academics. The first page of its preface has ten variants of the word *text* (textual, textuality, intertextual). Shibboleth continues with references to masking, deconstruction, "the notion of authorship," and "the problem of literary genres." And, however adamant a Bradbury fan, the general reader is likely to be put off by sentences such as "Beyond this simple definition, Bakhtin saw carnival as a form of life and carnivalization as a dialogic process of literary meaning deeply implicated in the ideological clashes of its day." One begins to yearn for plain language, cum John Crowe Ransom: "In all the good Greek of Plato/I lack my roast beef and potato."

Conversations with Ray Bradbury is the latest in University Press of Mississippi's ongoing collations of interviews, bringing together sources ranging from *Writers' Market & Methods* (1948) to *Playboy* (1996) and *The Onion* (1999). As in

other volumes of the series, many of the interviews collected here are standard newspaper stuff, brief and repetitious, while others are lengthy and biased toward specific topics such as screenwriting, Bradbury's use of science, or constant themes. "I am *not* so much a science-fiction writer as a fantasist, moralist, visionary," Bradbury says again and again in various ways. "I believe we are better than we think we are, and worse than we can imagine.... We will survive our worst attempts to hurt ourselves."

The finest comment on Bradbury's work comes not in an interview but in the editor's introduction, quoted from a review by Orson Scott Card of *The Stories of Ray Bradbury* in the *Washington Post* — something I read to all my students.

"It is not the characters he expects you to identify with. Rather, he means to capture you in his own voice, expects you to see through his eyes. And his eyes see, not the cliché plot, but the whole meaning of the events; not the scenes or the individual people, but yourself and your own fears and your own family and the answer, at last, to the isolation that had seemed inevitable to you." ¶

Here Mr. Disch gives us a peek into the near future, from somewhere on the northern border of the United States. The author currently divides his time between New York City and the Catskills region of New York state. Whether he's in a red state or a blue state, however, Mr. Disch is always conscious of his palette.

The Wall of America

By Thomas M. Disch

MOST PEOPLE GOT MORE space along the Wall than they could ever use, even the oddballs who painted leviathan-sized canvases they

couldn't hope to sell to anyone who didn't have his own airplane hangar to hang their enormities. But if you did work on such a scale, you must have had money to burn, so what would it matter if you never sold your stuff? The important thing was having it hung where people could see it.

At least that was the important thing for Lester. He did actually sell something from time to time. He could never tell what it was that tickled them to the tune of five hundred dollars. Admittedly, that was not a lot to ask, even taking into account the collapse of the market, and the dollar. Sometimes a satisfied customer would return a year or two later and shell out another five hundred and vanish off into the sunset with his trophy in the back of his mini-van.

North Dakota did have pretty wonderful sunsets, no doubt about that. Sitting there by his stretch of the Wall, Lester would mix its colors on the palette of his imagination, heightening cerulean to a kind of dark

lavender, or putting an orangish blush into streaks of old rose. Turner would have loved North Dakota: a plain more perfectly Euclidean than the sea's, with skies of a corresponding serenity. The winds blew more swiftly for lack of friction, and jet trails would dissolve with an exquisite *douceur*, as though they knew they were the only thing happening.

His family, back in Des Moines, thought Lester was crazy, spending two months of each year at the Wall. Even so, his wife or one of his sons would sometimes make the trip north and spend a few days at his side, twiddling their thumbs or getting drunk. (Bobby had a definite problem with liquor at this point, just like his uncle Kevin. Very sad.) It was always a relief when they left, and Lester didn't have to invent things to talk about. He wasn't much of a talker. Ten years ago he wouldn't have figured himself for a painter either. He sold building material for Boardwalk Products. Mostly the new easy-bonding plywood that had been a precursor to the Wall. It cost almost nothing to mill and had the tensile strength of steel. Now it wasn't just diamonds that were forever. With a dab of bonding it was any post and lintel. Whence, the Wall. At least in terms of opportunity. Motive was another matter, and everyone had a different explanation for why the Wall was a practical requirement and a sound investment. The Canadians liked it because it kept out the Yanks, and the States liked it because it kept out the Leafers, and painters liked it most of all because it represented two hundred million square feet of wall space where they could all exhibit their pictures. You just sent in your application and they sent you back a choice of spreads.

Lester had picked the least densely hung stretch that they'd offered him, not so much because his paintings needed room to sprawl but because he did. It was always a shock to step out of the Winnebago and see the sky absolutely everywhere and the beets shivering. Was there any crop so unglamorous as beets? There was a good reason you never saw beets in still-lifes, or landscapes of beet fields. For miles in all directions there was nothing to look at but those beets — and Lester's pictures spaced along the Wall. Wall space on that scale was a luxury that even the King of Spain, if there still was one, couldn't lay claim to: the Escorial was too small. Now it was like flu shots or cheese (in Canada, at least), available for the asking. Having the stuff posted on a Website didn't begin to compare. This was real, not virtual. Now China was adapting its own Great Wall to the

same purpose, and Berlin was rebuilding a new wall where the old one used to be. But there was no public funding behind those projects, and neither had got off the ground. In America the NEA had been behind the project from the start, along with Homeland Security. It also helped that Boardwalk Products was located in the House Speaker's home state of Montana, the state with the longest single stretch of the Wall.

Lester tried to reciprocate the government's generosity. He didn't give his paintings away, except to someone in the family or a close friend, and then only if they wanted one, which they generally didn't. He sold them at five hundred bucks a pop, which was the average price of paintings of the size he did. He had no illusion about being discovered by a gallery or a collector and suddenly rolling in clover. Since '09, most painters could expect to earn about as much on an hourly basis as a good plumber, which was about what painters got back in the Renaissance if they weren't somebody's cousin. Painting was no longer something a person did for the money. It was more on the order of fishing or falconry, something that got its hook or claws in you. You did it just for the beauty of it. That seemed as good an explanation as any.

Anyhow, Lester didn't need explanations himself, and these were not his thoughts, but rather an attempt to explain how, when he was out there by the Wall, he would let his mind go blank for hours at a time, sitting on a plastic recliner in the shadow of the Winnebago's rolled-out awning. Or sitting inside at his smaller easel while the CD played some old favorite. Harold in Italy or Hank Williams or Schwarzkopf or Cheb Mami. He wondered if there was some secret correlation that he'd never noticed between what he listened to and what he painted. You'd think there would be, wouldn't you?

One thing Lester had not counted on in signing on for this stretch of the Wall was the Northern Lights. At this time of year, mid-summer, they were sensational. Either that or he was losing his mind. Because so far he'd only ever seen the auroras when he was out alone with no other witness to confirm that the sky had really lighted up like a lava lamp, like searchlights after a prison break, like Christmas Eve in New Jersey. And all in a crickety silence far from all frog ponds or drive-ins. No one on the road that ran along parallel to the Wall, no visitors. Just Lester and

Apocalypse Now but without the sound track. You want some proof that God exists? There it was. Better than that, it was like having a private conversation with Him but not in words, in a succession of lightning flash slides.

It went beyond beautiful and trespassed on scary, as though, if this really was some coded message from Above, then it might turn out to be that God wanted him to kill his only son Isaac. "Bobby, how would you like to go on a hiking trip with me to Mount Rainier?" Except, of course, God wouldn't recycle the exact same storyline. No, the scary part was exactly the beauty of thing, the way it erased all other considerations, like beauty can, or sex. As though at that moment when you think it can't get any better you just blew a fuse and got trapped there in your own pure bliss, in the dream come true.

Forever. Which is just where beauty seems to take you. Up to the fresco on the vaulted ceiling where all the angels are playing violins and contemplating the perfections of God. But then, as ever, his fuse wasn't blown, and the aurora faded, and soon enough had passed from memory. You couldn't paint the Northern Lights, no one ever had. If you brought up the subject, people who had never seen them would give you a blank look, the same as they do when you try to talk about painting.

Painting was one of those things there's no point talking about because when you try it comes out nonsense.

MOST OF THE TIME Lester slept outside. The Winnebago could get to be a sauna even with two ceiling fans. He would spread out a sheet of foam rubber over the recliner and an unzipped sleeping bag over that, which he'd zip up into a cocoon sometime in the course of the night. After a while the crickets went to sleep, and then he would follow suit a little later, if God hadn't scheduled a light show.

There was rarely traffic on the Wall's service road, since ten miles south was an Interstate that the truckers and long-haul drivers preferred. Whole nights went by without the drama of headlights approaching and dopplering past. But then there came the night when, far off to the west along the service road, a triad of lights appeared, headlights and above them a brighter beam, like a searchlight. Police? he wondered. The third

light swiveled and focused on the first and westernmost of the paintings Lester had hung on the Wall. It paused, and the headlights advanced a little closer along the road. The beam of the searchlight fixed on the next painting. Lester was fascinated, he'd never seen his own paintings like this, at night, shrunk by distance.

As the lights drew nearer he realized, from its clunky silhouette, that it was not a police car but a Hummer. Which, when Lester switched on his own outdoor floodlights, signaled back by lifting and lowering its brights. The Hummer's spotlight had reached only the fourth of the thirty-nine paintings, and the survey of Lester's work continued at an unhurried pace, giving Lester time to go into the Winnebago and get his pistol strapped on under his terry robe, just in case. Artists along the Wall rarely ran into problems with would-be felons, except in the areas around Buffalo, Vancouver, and the Idaho panhandle. "Nice stuff," said the night visitor in a nasal North Dakotan whine, when the Hummer had drawn abreast of the Winnebago opposite Painting #19. He spoke without getting out of the car, his face masked by the glare of his lights.

"I thank you," said Lester. "We don't get many visitors this time of night."

"I can see that. But I like seeing the pictures at night. If they're not too small. Yours are nice and big."

Lester nodded noncommittally.

"Would you like a beer?" the man asked.

He didn't but it seemed more friendly to say that he did. When the guy dismounted, six pack in hand, Lester could see he was no more than twenty, with acne that his meager sideburns could not conceal. He was wearing a black tanktop from Guggenheim/Vegas. Lester pressed the cold can to the back of his neck for a moment of gratitude, then popped the top and wet his lips without taking a sip.

"I've been driving along the Wall three days now," the kid told him.

"East to west or west to east?"

"I started in Calgary and hit the Wall in Glacier Park. It was almost solid art for the first fifty miles, then it tapered off. But this stretch tonight has been the sparest. I think the last guy I saw was back at the turnoff to Bottineau."

Lester nodded. "That'd be Mrs. Lloyd. She does those watercolors. Beautiful stuff. I get her propane for her, and she bakes things for me. Some kind of Italian cookie. You want one?"

"Not with the beer, thanks just the same."

"So." Lester pretended to take another sip. "Are you an artist yourself then?"

The kid shook his head. A matted tress of blond hair flopped down over his forehead. He had the pale skin of someone who works indoors or is up all night. Backlit by the glare of the spot mounted on his Hummer, he reminded Lester of one of Le Nain's card sharps, lit by a single candle. The same stoic sadness. Lester lifted the cold can to his lips and this time let himself enjoy a sip of it.

"I guess you've been at it a long time yourself," the kid ventured.

"A while," said Lester. "Back when I was thirty or so I was in an accident and had to spend some time in rehab. They made us have a hobby. I didn't have a hobby, didn't believe in them really, so I told the lady in charge that I liked to paint. Sometimes I used to watch that stuff on Channel 21. Western Civilization. I don't know how else I came up with the idea. But they had the equipment there and no one else was using it. So I started painting."

"And now you've got all that stuff there on the Wall," the kid said respectfully.

"And a lot more besides, back in Des Moines."

"I really like it. But you probably painted all of your pictures in the daylight."

"M-hm. For the most part. There are some painters who prefer to paint at night. They're set up for it. But it changes the color. They kind of fade in the light of day."

"Like vampires," suggested the kid.

"I guess. I never met a vampire myself."

The kid laughed, and seemed to blush, and finished off his can in two quick gulps. He crushed it and, turning quickly, threw it through the open window of the Hummer. Then he opened another.

"My name is Lester," Lester said, offering his hand.

"Gulliver," said the kid.

"No shit. I never met a Gulliver before."

"Neither have I. I may be the only one. Plenty of Keanus and Kevins but no Gullivers any more."

"I have a brother named Kevin," Lester said. "And a son named Robert."

Gulliver nodded. "Oh, I figured you were straight. I guess a lot of guys go cruising here along the Wall, but it's only the pictures I'm interested in."

"So," said Lester, reaching back to tilt the recliner into a sitting position. "Tell me about yourself."

Lester woke up in the first glimmering of dawn to the sound of snoring. Still half-drunk, he thought he was back home in bed beside Carla. But then the false horizon of the Wall reminded him of the true situation. The snores were Gulliver's, wrapped in his own sleeping bag, asleep beside his Hummer, with a litter of beer cans about him. His aim, and Lester's, had deteriorated as they had gone on drinking.

So many cans. So much talk. And most of it Lester's. Gulliver had simply run out of information he thought worth sharing. He'd attended high school in a dutiful way, then shunted tracks to a college in Calgary, where it dawned on him that he had little interest in the future to which all his education was leading. He was not a team player. Books bored him. He'd tried to fall in love and failed. He took out a student loan and used it as the down payment for the Hummer and headed off to see what the world beyond Canada was like, beginning with the Wall of America, which was, he'd confided with drunken reverence, the weirdest thing he'd ever seen.

"Why do people do it?" he asked of Lester. "What's in it for them?"

"It's not the money," Lester said virtuously.

"Yeah, I can see that. People with money find other ways to spend it."

"By and large, yes."

"It just doesn't make sense to me."

"That may be the point, partly. You seem to find it *interesting*. Or you wouldn't be following the Wall."

"I suppose."

"Let me ask you: Do you iron your own shirts?"

Gulliver squinted down at the logo on his tanktop. "Why would I iron *this*?"

"Well, do you have any flannel shirts. Plaids?"

Gulliver nodded and then slowly a smile began to form. He was one of those people who are only good-looking when they smile, and he didn't smile that often. "You mean the way it changes color when the iron goes across it?"

"Yes. Is that a pleasure for you?"

"Uh-huh. And painting is like that?"

"Basically, yes." That had got Lester started. He told Gulliver all the things he'd thought about painting, his own, and the ones he'd seen in museums, and the thousands of them all along the Wall. It must have been something like people experienced when they first go to AA, the spillgates opening. Or the joy of bulimia, except this wasn't just one day's excess he was purging, but a lifetime's feast.

Now, as with a dream, he couldn't remember any of the details. The big insights, the droll anecdotes, the shy confidences of what he hoped he might be able to accomplish.

He could only remember Gulliver saying, with great earnestness, when Lester had finally wound down, "You should do that."

"It doesn't sound crazy to you?"

"In a way, yeah. But the same way my buying this Hummer was crazy. You should do it. Truly."

At which point, without even saying good-night, they both stopped talking and fell asleep.

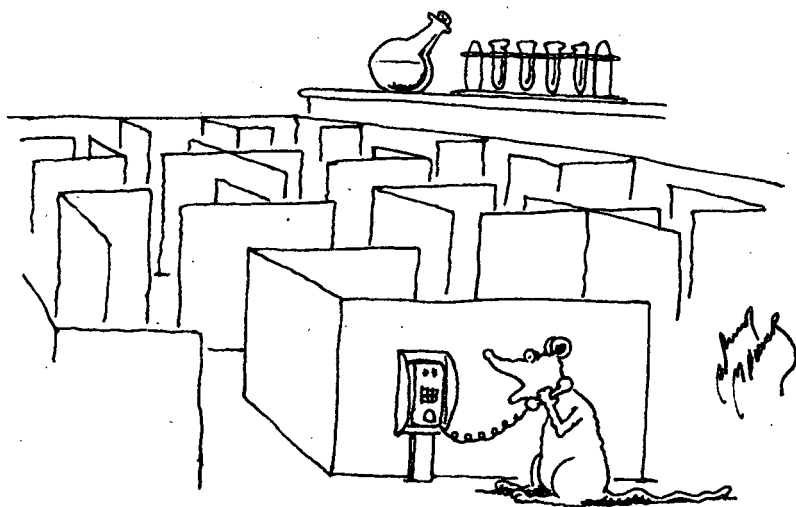
When the Park Rangers checked out the Winnebago, four days later, there was no sign of any mischief having been done. The doors were unlocked, the contents in good order. The paintings were still hanging along the Wall, except for two of them, #24 and #31. The Rangers fastened a security camera to the top of the Winnebago and returned a week later to find that another painting had been taken off the Wall. But it was a legitimate purchase. A check for \$500 had been slipped under the door, with a note from the buyer, who was one of Lester's return customers. The Rangers contacted Lester's wife, and a few days later his son Robert and brother Kevin appeared to sign for the Winnebago. When they drove off they left the paintings hanging where they were.

They were well hung and hugged the Wall like moss all through the

autumn winds and winter snow, thanks to the Miracle of Boardwalk's Everfast. They were still there in May, when the artists and tourists began to return, but now they'd become a minor news item. No one had ever left so many paintings on the Wall to weather. One commentator on the UND campus TV station declared that the missing artist was another Leonardo da Vinci, and while that was definitely a minority view, the story got picked up by the Drudge Report, and for a while Lester was the most famous Missing Person in the country.

And the paintings stayed where they were through another winter and another tourist season, by order of the Park Service, who contested the family's right to remove them from the Wall, now that they had become a kind of monument to the honesty of the good citizens of North Dakota and perdurability of acrylic paint. The family realized that their attic full of Lester's other paintings was appreciating in value every day the paintings on the Wall continued where they were, so it was in their interest to achieve a stalemate with the Park Service.

They are still there to be looked at, on the Wall where Lester left them. ☞



"Hello, Dad! You were right about the real world. I want to come home!"

Back in our July 2003 issue, Al Michaud introduced us to Clem Crowder and his wife, along with their friends and neighbors on Clapboard Island, Maine. Those characters and their passion for lobster dinners threatened to make Albert Crowder's New Orleans denizens seem as staid as the participants in your average economic summit meeting. The time has come to return to the wooly world of Mr. Crowder, where his beloved pet may well have them all up to their ears in boiling water before the day is done.

Ayuh, Clawdus

By Al Michaud

LOBSTERS MAKE LOUSY PETS. Any damn fool would reason so, given half an occasion to think about it. Somehow or other Clem Crowder had never mentally weighed in on the matter, which seemed a peculiar thing to neglect, as he'd had long experience in just such an endeavor.

Lobster owning, that is. Clem Crowder had kept old Clawdus going on forty years and not once had his slippers been fetched.

Clawdus, for his part, never aspired toward anything resembling man's best friend. The relationship, rooted in some fundamental, long-forgotten error of reasoning, had settled into nothing more than a habit of mutual tolerance.

"Hol' stiddy, now," Clem grumbled to the lobster in question. Clawdus stared out from his watery home, a makeshift wetsmack that dominated the back of the Crowder fishhouse, with unblinkable inkpot eyes. "Hol' stiddy, ye crab-sidlin' crittur."

Clem worked a paring iron over a small nugget of whale ivory, divvyng his attention between the lobster shape emerging from it and the

real one in its wetsmack. Painstakingly he shaved away thin slivers of ivory, his tongue sweeping the length of his lips in fervid concentration while shaky hands etched long antennae across the back of the carapace.

Attention to the particulars was the hallmark of the craft, or so his grampappy had always said. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he notched the fan into the tip of the tail.

Without warning Clawdus cracked his pincers shut. Clem flinched from the sudden motion, his iron slipping across the scrimshaw lobster and removing the thumb of an ivory claw.

"Doaw!" Clem threw the ruined piece to the floor, launched from his stool and gripped the rim of the wetsmack.

"Ye bett-ah staht earnin yer keep aroun here," he hollered down to the lobster, his breath forming tiny ripples on the water's surface. "Or it's th' stewpot fer ye!"

Clawdus spun around on his spindly legs and slapped the surface of the water with his massive tail.

Taking the spray full in the face, Clem swiped the air as if the water droplets were a swarm of riled bees. "Why that's it, ye crizzle-shelled, good-fer-nawthin...."

"Easy now, Clem Crowd-ah."

For one fleeting moment, Clem thought the lobster had spoken to him.

"Don't let that lop-stah git th' bett-ah of ye," said Dunky Drinkwater, standing in the doorway with a gunnysack over his shoulder.

"Dunky!" Clem cried to his old friend, wiping his face dry with a handkerchief. "Wot's th' word, wot's th' word!"

Dunky chewed his lower lip, as was his habit when he found himself the bearer of bad news. Without a word he upended the sack, spilling grotesque little chunks of ivory onto the table.

Clem rummaged through the scrimshaw pieces, disappointed by their plentitude. "Ye didn't sell even one?"

Dunky pointed to one notably ugly piece. "I almost sold that one t' Missus Mullins, but she sed she a'ready had a pie crimp-ah."

Clem held the piece up for a clearer view. "Pie crimp-ah? Why, that's supposed t' be a seal sunnin hisself on an outcroppin."

Dunky studied the scrimshaw with pained effort. "I see it now, Clem."

Clem pitched the piece back on the table. "How's an ah-tist supposed t' make money aroun here?"

"DID SOMEONE SAY MONEY?"

Clem and Dunky spun toward the booming voice. The big man in the doorway was a stranger to Clapboard Island, there was no doubt about that, and his enormous gold belt buckle and ten-gallon hat made it a solid bet that he wasn't a Maine native at all.

"Howdy, boys!" the man shouted again, in what was apparently his normal speaking voice. "Ah heard money, and Ah'm lookin to spread aroun a little of the green stuff m'self! Is one of yew gents Clem Crowder?"

The man rolled into the fishhouse uninvited, his footsteps marked by the jangle of, by the Good Lord Harry, spurs. Clem eyed the man and his spurs warily. "Who wants t' know?"

"G. W. Calhoun's the name, but yew call me Tex and we'll get along just fine!" He placed a friendly hand on Clem's shoulder, leaned in as if he were about to tell a great secret, and said in his megaphone voice, "Ah'm in need of a mess of crawdaddies, pardner, and Ah'd like to cut out the middleman! Fish warden said yew'd undersell anyone in town!"

Clem jumped from the volume of the Texan's voice, then jumped again at the mention of the warden. "Fish warden! Damn that Patty Shenanigan and wot he passes fer hyoo-mah! He knows good an well I ain't gut no lop-stahs t' sell."

Tex stepped back, his great drooping moustache framing an expression of utter surprise. "Son, Ah thought yew were a lobsterman!"

"Clem's gut a fragile standin in th' community," offered Dunky. "Ev-ah since he served them bad lop-stahs at last ye-ah's Annular Clambake."

"Stow it, Dunky," muttered Clem.

"Is it true, Son?" Tex asked, a hint of disappointment creeping into his voice. "Are yew out of the fishin biz?"

"Sorry, Jun-yah," Clem answered, feeling no compunction against calling a man his own age *Junior* as the man had just referred to him as *Son* not once but twice. "Ran into some hahd times an had t' sell m' bo't jus t' make ends meet."

"Well ain't that a kick in the seat!"

"Ayuh," Clem agreed. He fumbled his hands through the scrimshaw pieces and selected an exquisitely detailed sample. "Mebbe I cud int'rest ye in a piece o' fine aht?"

"Son, that's the godawfullest thing Ah ever saw in my life," Tex said, barely giving the scrimshaw a glance. "Ah'm in need of crawdaddies, not crappola! If yew could direct me to the nearest — " the Texan stopped himself mid-sentence and stared slack-jawed toward the back of the fishhouse. "Well fry my beans and call me Pedro!"

"We bake our beans aroun here, Pedro," Clem mumbled as he scrutinized his scrimshaw handiwork in consternation.

Shoving past Clem, Tex placed a hand solidly on Dunky's shoulder, spun him around, and pointed to the wetsmack. "Would yew look at the size of that crawdaddy!"

"Oh, that ain't no crawdaddy, Tex," said Dunky. "That's ol' Clawdus."

"Son, Ah've got longhorns smaller'n that thing!" Tex exaggerated. He marched over to the wetsmack, Dunky in tow, and stared down into the water. "Have my eyes gone funny, or is that critter blue?"

"Ayuh," Dunky said. "He's got a bluish tinge to 'im."

"Tinge! Why, that thing's bluer'n a plucked yardbird in January! Tell me, Son, ain't that unusual?"

"T'ain't unheard of," Clem replied, joining the two beside the wetsmack. "But t' ain't real common, neith-ah."

"Well, to me it's yooouu-nique! How much yew take for it?"

"Yer money's not good here," Dunky said, placing himself between the Texan and lobster, as if the man might actually make a grab for it. "Not when it comes t' Clawdus!"

"Money's good everywhere, Son!" Tex pulled out a roll of bills thick enough to choke a mackerel. He licked off several and slapped them on the table.

Clem's eyes riveted on the stack of green. "Waal, now, that's big biz'ness...."

"Everything's bigger in Texas, Son!" Tex added three more bills to the pile. "Everything!"

Dunky shook his head defiantly.

With great effort Clem peeled his eyes from the money and looked down into the wetsmack. Clawdus stared back at him, expressionless. In

all these long years Clem had never considered the reason he kept the lobster the way he did. The species, for the most part, lacked the qualifiers that might bestow it with a respectable pethood status. One need not travel great lengths to find a more suitable companion; the world contains a generous supply of decent hound dogs, there's no domestic shortage of tabbies and their ilk, and songbirds are practically a dime a dozen.

Clem had to admit, when it came to pet ownership, his own reasoning process seemed shamefully neglected.

"What'll it be, Son?"

It's time to fish or cut bait, Clem realized. The choice was upon him, and suddenly he knew he needn't put the why and wherefore to it at all.

To him, the conclusion was foregone.

Lobsters make lousy pets.

"Ye just bought yerself a lop-stah," said Clem.

"YEEEE-HAAAW!" Tex snatched the ten-gallon hat from his head and drove it into the wetsmack with a tremendous splash. When he yanked it back, Clawdius was netted within. Or at least part of him was: his thick tail completely filled the hat's deep felt pocket, leaving his upper carapace and claws sprawling over the wide brim.

"It's been a pleasure, boys, a real pleasure!" In a flurry of handshakes Tex made his good-byes and marched out of the fishhouse.

No sooner had the jingle of spurs faded into the distance than Dunky voiced his disapproval. "Ooooh, Clem. Ye shouldn'ta oughta done that."

Clem scooped the scrimshaw nuggets back into the gunnysack and held it out for Dunky. "Ain't ye gut sum peddlin t' do? Wot am I payin ye fer?"

"Ye ain't payin me, rememb-ah?" Dunky growled, snatching the sack from Clem. He slung it over his shoulder and headed for the door. Just beyond the doorway he paused, opened his mouth as if to say more, and in the end only shook his head and walked away.

Clem shouted to the retreating figure. "Ye jus' worry 'bout sellin that aht! An I don't want ye baggin th' bowlines this time!"

Clem turned his attention to the greenbacks clutched in his hand. *Easiest money wotever made*, he thought to himself as he unrolled the stack to count his earnings.

He hadn't made it past the third bill before the Voice started in.

"Ahn't yeou th' clev-ah one, Mist-ah Crowd-ah!"

Clem ducked between his shoulders like a turtle into its shell.

"Leave me be, woman," he moaned.

The Voice ignored the idle command. "I'll do no such thing, Mr. Crowd-ah, ye shameless no-account. Sellin Clawdus out from und-ah my nose, behind my back, when I ain't aroun t' knock sense inta ye!"

Clem swung around and faced Mrs. Crowder. She stood in front of the wet smack, glaring at him over her glasses.

"He weren't yers t' sell or keep, Muth-ah," he said. "So mind yer own damn biz'niss!"

Clem was never so forthright with his wife, but of course he knew she wasn't truly there. The real Mrs. Crowder, a seagoing schoolmarm aboard the *Daisy-A-Day*, was now thousands of miles away in the South Chiny Sea, and not destined to return for another two years. The Mrs. Crowder that stood before him now was but a figment of his imagination, a manifestation of his conscience instilled through years of browbeating by the true Mrs. Crowder.

"Ye mind that tongue o' yers, Mr. Crowd-ah, or I'll mind it fer ye!" said the figment. Like the real Mrs. Crowder, it wouldn't stand for sass.

Clem stood his ground. "Too late t' do anythin 'bout it now, Muth-ah. It's a done deal. Clawdus is gone."

Mrs. Crowder tilted her head in admonishment, her chin wattling up over her lace choke-collar. "Wot wud yer pappy say 'bout it, that's wot I'd like t' know, Mr. Crowd-ah."

Clem fiddled with the money in his hands, too distraught to count it. It was his pappy who, many years ago, had passed the blue-tinged lobster on to his youngest boy with the strict condition that he never, under no circumstance, part with it. Clawdus had always been a particular indulgence of his pappy's which, now that he thought on it, was an odd deviation from the customary for a man known for neither his affection nor his eccentricities.

Clem mumbled lamely to the figment of his wife. "I don't think pappy wud mind, really —"

"Sing Fie!" the figment exclaimed. "Yer pappy cared more fer Clawdus than th' whole lot o' his begotten combined! Now ye git out there an' fetch that lop-stah back!"

Mrs. Crowder swung her arm forward and pointed toward the door. Figment or no, Clem knew better than to defy his wife's authority, especially when she wielded her finger with such peevishness. He scrambled through the door before his imagination conjured up a rolling pin in Mrs. Crowder's other hand.

CLEM NAVIGATED the carpeted hallways of the Oceanside, Clapboard Island's pitiful stab at a luxury resort. G. W. Calhoun occupied room 7C, the "frilly suite with all th' extrees," according to the desk clerk.

Clem had never been beyond the hotel's lobby, but a sense of purpose guided him directly to the door.

His knuckles had barely rapped the door when it cracked open to reveal a familiar and unexpected face.

"Yeou!" exclaimed the wooden puppet before him, its impassive features somehow managing an expression of hostile surprise. The puppet's ventriloquist master, Captain Inermo Sane, as always, registered an identical look. "Wot are yeou doin here, Clem Crowd-ah?"

"I might ask yeou th' same thing," Clem replied, addressing the puppet directly. To his surprise, several more heads poked over Captain Sane's shoulder, and as the door flew wide it revealed a roomful of Clapboard Island's most significant citizens.

"Clem Crowd-ah," they seemed to growl in unison. Moody, Dunmore, and Pratt, the town selectmen, rushed to the door, barring his entrance with their usual solidarity.

"Wot are th' likes o' yeou doin here, Crowd-ah?" sizzled Dunmore, reflecting the very question posed by Captain Sane. An entire year had passed since Clem had inadvertently poisoned the townsfolk at the Annual Clambake, but all was positively *not* forgotten.

"I'm here t' get my lop-stah back," Clem replied, ready to push past the selectmen if it came to that.

Captain Sane gasped sharply through his dummy. For him, ventriloquism was not a hobby. He'd been unable to speak without his diminutive double, carved into an exact replica of himself, since the day he'd tussled with the business end of a swordfish. When his breath returned, he stammered, "Yeou git outta here; Crowd-ah, ye'll ruin ever'thin'!"

Clem caught the jingle of spurs as a ten-gallon Stetson parted the crowd. "What's all the ruckus...? Clem Crowder!" Tex Calhoun bellowed, extending his hand in welcome. "Why, Ah ain't seen yew in a dog's age!" he quipped.

The selectmen were startled to find that Tex and Clem knew each other, but were quick to recover. "Clem stup by fer a quick howdya-do," said Dunmore, placing an arm around Clem's shoulder and turning him away from the door, "afore he shoves off fer hum."

"Nonsense!" said Tex, placing his hand on Clem's other shoulder and pulling him inside. "That ain't no way to Howdy!"

The occupants of the room glowered at Clem with bridled ire. Not only the selectmen, but the town aldermen, Mayor Nayes, the Mullinses and Peaveys and representatives of all the prominent families of Clapboard Island, were crammed into the Texan's suite. Clem was at a loss for words.

Against the far wall, Clem spied an enormous glass tank brimming with colorful tropical fish. Amongst the aquatic plants squatted the hulking form of Clawdus, lazily snapping at aerator bubbles with an enormous blue claw.

Clem hurried to the tank and pressed his face against the glass. "Don't git too durn cumf'tible," he whispered. Clawdus continued to snap at the bubbles, his feeding spinnerets arranged in a manner Clem recognized as a smile.

Clem patted the money in his slicker pocket. He'd added a few extra dollars to the stack Tex had given him to sweeten the pot for a buyback.

Tex rattled ice cubes in a glass to grab Clem's attention. "Yew look like yer spittin cotton, Son," he said, handing over the drink. "Have a Texas Tornader. Now, what can Ah dew yew for?"

"Ayuh, wot *do* ye want, Crowd-ah?" demanded Dunmore. The selectmen circled Clem like a school of piranha. "We gut biz'ness wot needs attendin."

"S'right," added Pratt. "Tex wunts t' buy th' entire south end o' Clebberd, don'tchya, Tex?"

"Gonna build a plushy resort, bigger'n th' Oceanside," added Moody, "an bring lotsa money inta th' community, ain'tchya, Tex?"

Tex guzzled his drink and handed the empty glass to Dunmore for a

refill. "Yew boys got tongue enough for ten rows o' teeth! Ah like what Ah'm a-seein so far, but the deal ain't clinched yet."

"Ye'll know by Sat'idy, Tex," affirmed Dunmore as he handed over a refreshed drink. "Ye'll settle yer mind by th' big to-do on Sat'idy."

Clem reasserted himself amidst the whirlwind of selectmen. "Wot to-do on Sat'idy?"

Tex beamed. "I'm a-throwin a li'l barbecue this Saturday, Son, down along the shoreline!"

"Smack dab where th' new plushy resort's a-gonna be," jumped in Captain Sane, his ventriloquist dummy practically salivating from the excitement. "There'll be fiddlin, foot-steppin, vittles an with-its...right, Tex?"

"If'n by 'with-its' yew mean 'fixins,' yew're righter than a Lone Star Republican! It's gonna be a hoedown like yew ain't never seen....!" Tex crowed. Turning to Clem, he added, "And yer to thank for it, Son."

Clem was taken aback. "Me?"

"Yessirree," said Tex, almost teary-eyed. "If'n it weren't for yew, Ah wouldn't have the showpiece to m' barbecue....," he tipped his glass toward the tank "...that thar crawdaddy."

Clem's eyes bulged. "Clawdius...in a barby-cue?" he sputtered. "Why, ye can't barby-cue lop-stah!"

"Yew can barbecue anything, Son," said Tex. "Anything!"

"Don'tchya know nawthin, Crowd-ah?" Dunmore said, nudging his way to the fore. "Ye can roast lop-stah on a spit jus' like anythin else."

"Jus' add a dollop o' Tex's hummade vinegar syrup, right, Tex?" added Moody.

"That's barbecue sauce, pardner," said Tex, and with an exaggerated wink added, "spiced with a li'l holler-painya!"

"Tex, 'bout that lop-stah, an our biz'ness doin's this mahnin....," Clem began.

"Business! I plumb forgot!" Tex lassoed Clem around the shoulder and escorted him to the door. "Me an the boys, we got a fur piece to go on our business, Son. They're all hat and no cattle, if yew catch mah meanin. It's been a pleasure, though, a real pleasure...."

"But, hold up now....," Clem stalled, reaching in his pocket for the money. "I want t' buy back m' lop-stah...."

"Whoa, Son," said Tex, stopping Clem just outside the door. "Never slap a man who's chewin tobacco. That critter's carryin' my brand now."

Clem held forth the money. "Y'see, well, Muth-ah, that is, m' wife, she's gonna miss that lop-stah sumthin awful...."

"Yew charge that to the dust and let the rain settle it," Tex said. He looked down at the money, unimpressed. "But yew don't worry none about that crawdaddy, Son. Yew mosey on down to mah shindig this Saturday and Ah'll promise yew the first mouthful o' that barbecued critter!"

Before he could protest any further, the door slammed shut and Clem was left holding the money alone in the hallway.

"Ain't nawthin mer despizable than a minner-bellied gudgeon," rumbled a voice behind him.

Clem turned around slowly. He'd recognized the voice instantly, though twenty years had passed since he'd heard it last, and then with the full expectation of never hearing it again. It was the voice of a dead man.

His father, Codhook Crowder.

"Pappy!" Clem called to the figure at the end of the hallway.

"Don'tchya pappy ol' Codhook," said the figure, a glint of malice in his eye. "Ain't no get o' mine wot wud swap th' fam'bly lop-stah fer a pockyful o' smutty lucre!"

Clem knew the figure of Codhook Crowder was merely the expression of an overwrought imagination, no different than the figment of Mrs. Crowder he'd encountered earlier, but the fear he felt was no less the same for it. "I knowed how affectuous ye were t'ward Clawdius, pappy, an I —"

"Affectuous! T'ward that christly lop-stah?" roared Codhook. He held aloft his right arm, letting the light glint off the hook that supplanted his hand and bestowed upon him his nickname. "Don'tchya know how yer pappy los' his arse grabb-ah, Sonny?"

Clem shied away from the sight of the hook, a fear of his since childhood. "I — I dunno, Pappy...were it a shahk?"

Codhook launched down the hallway. In one swift motion he swung his hook upward and snagged the collar of Clem's slicker, pulling him close to his hardfavored mug. "T'weren't no goddamn shahk wot did this," he bellowed. "T'was that jeezly lop-stah!"

Clem quailed at his father's brute aggression, or at least the power of his mind to imagine it. "Clawdius did that?"

"Eyah." Codhook softened a bit, unhooking himself from Clem's slicker. "I hate that lop-stah down t' his green tomalley. He's impert'nt, though, Sonny. T'was my pappy wot passed 'im down t' me. Alst I know, he's impert'nt. Ye'll git 'im back, won'tchya?"

Clem nodded. "Ayuh. I gut m' purchase money an I a'ready commenced negotiatin...."

"Purchase money!" Codhook snarled. "Ye're goin 'bout it barse-ackwards, boy! That highsteppin Texan ain't gut no need fer yer gelt an grubstake. Naw...wot he's needin is a replacemint. A substy-toot."

"A substy-toot...." Clem mulled over the idea. A replacement lobster — better yet, a whole potful of replacement lobsters — would surely tempt the Texan more than money alone.

"Eyah," Codhook rumbled. "Show 'im how it's gonna be. Ye let that landlubbin flatland-ah put th' oakum to ye in thar afore, Sonny. Ye git that from th' Weathersbys, ye know."

"I knowed it, pappy," Clem feigned to agree. It was his father's custom to attribute all of his children's weaknesses to their mother's side of the family. "I'll use th' purchase money t' buy back my bo't an staht right in on them substy-toots."

Codhook nodded his grizzled head. "Yeou do that, Sonny. Give that Texan an even trade, clearn through. An if he tries t' put th' oakum t' ye agin, boy, ye show yer fetch-up..."

Codhook flashed his vicious hook before Clem's eyes.

"...or I'll cleave ye from stem t' stern!"

Clem stared open-mouthed at the silver hook. He didn't know if the figment was capable of fulfilling such a threat, but he knew better than to put it to the test.

As he fled down the hallway, his mind drifted to his boat and its current owner, a man to be avoided at all costs under normal circumstances. Trepidation crept through his bones.

Clem Crowder was on a headlong course for a meeting with the most unnerving man on Clapboard Island.

Clem stood outside the funeral parlor with dreadful anticipation. The sign above him creaked and swayed in the chill ocean breeze. *Coffin & Graves Funeralary Services*, it read, and on a separate sign below, *and*

Apothecary. The latter was a more recent addition by the parlor's current proprietor, Mordecai Malbon, though Clem knew of no one who engaged the undertaker in this capacity.

In fact Clem knew of no one who would engage Mordecai for the funerary services if not for the fact that his was the only funeral parlor on Clapboard. The circumstances surrounding his proprietorship of *Coffin & Graves* were dubious, to say the least. Certainly no one questioned the quiet passing of young Mr. Coffin; after all, he was eight months past his one-hundred-and-seventh birthday and looking every toilworn minute of it; but when Uriah Graves gave up the ghost a week later at the tender age of thirty-eight, by the consumption of embalming fluid no less, more than a few eyebrows were raised. Curiously, an impromptu and hastily scribbled will turned up that left the entire operation in the hands of the young mortician apprentice, Mordecai Malbon.

But all that was years ago and suspicions had softened over time. Clem looked up and down the street, then checked his watch once again. It wasn't like Dunky to be late. He'd agreed to accompany Clem for moral support, but now it looked as though he might have chickened out.

"Pssst, back here," called Dunky, motioning Clem from the corner of the funeral parlor. "I gut here early an thut I'd look aroun."

Clem followed him down the alleyway to the short landing pier behind the parlor. "There she is," said Dunky.

Clem hadn't laid eyes on her for eight months, but he would recognize his lobster boat in a pea soup fogbank at midnight. She was no longer named the *Belching Spider*, he noticed; that name had been planed off the stern molding and replaced with *Yankee Reaper*. Her main function now was transporting the recently deceased to the mainland graveyard.

Both men climbed aboard and looked around. Other than the name, everything appeared to be unchanged. "She seems t' be in fine fettle," said Clem, nodding his approval. He stepped into the wheelhouse. "Mebbe I'll jus' loosen 'er up with a few turns."

A voice from nowhere froze his hand as he was about to crank the starter. "Don' make Good-Foot keell you, *m'sieur*."

Both men whirled around to find a musclebound thug hauling himself up the larboard side, a bowie knife clenched in his yellow teeth. They

instantly recognized Good-Foot Toussaint, Mordecai's French-Canadian half-brother and hired malefactor. "Oh, eet ees you, *M'sieur Crow-DAIR!*" spoke Good-Foot around the knife. "Why you not say so, eh?"

"Gorry, yeou gave me a staht!" yelled Clem, clutching his chest. "Wot were ye doin down there?"

Pulling a pack of cigarettes from the boat's storage compartment, Good-Foot removed the knife from between his teeth and replaced it with a smoke. He eyed the two men shrewdly before answering. "I was sweeming weeth ze feeshes, no?" Garrulous laughter propelled black clouds from his lungs like the stack of a freight train.

Clem knew better than to probe any deeper. Good-Foot Toussaint was rumored to be on the giving end of more murder, lewdness, and violent escapades than any other man in local history, with the possible exception of his father, Three-Legged Pierre. And a fair share of that mayhem was most likely at the behest of his brother Mordecai. For all Clem knew, Good-Foot had just come up from stashing one of Mordecai's overdue debtors under the dock.

"How you like zee new *Yunkee Reap-air*, huh?" Good-Foot asked, wringing the water from his shirt as he tried to keep his cigarette dry. "I am zee skipp-air of zhes leettle *bateau*."

Clem thought he looked more like a buccaneer, what with the bandanna wrapped tightly around his thick head. Good-Foot entered the wheelhouse and cranked the starter. The old make-and-break Knox Marine one-lunger engine coughed and sputtered as it tried to turn over. "Advance th' spahk," Clem said, presuming to advise a skipper on how to run his own vessel. "An give 'er more choke."

The engine seesawed roughly, but didn't start. Clem was anxious to get his boat back in the care of her rightful owner. "Ye may not be skipp-ah fer long," he mumbled to himself, then more loudly: "Is Mordecai aroun?"

"Speak of the devil," said the oily-smooth voice of the mortician. Mordecai emerged from the shadow of a nearby bait shack. "And he shall appear."

Clem turned to the mortician, forcing a smile. "Wa-al, now, jus' th' man I want t' see! How's life treatin ye, Mordecai?"

"Seldom," replied the mortician. He glided to the edge of the dock and

lowered himself into the boat. "Is this a social call, Mr. Crowder, or do we have business to transact?"

"Biz'niss," Clem confirmed. For all his creepiness and other peculiarities, most folks appreciated the mortician's short-spoken ways. Unlike his half-brother, Mordecai was rail-thin and tall, with a pallor comparable to that of his average customer. He wore a soot black suit and stovepipe hat, no matter the occasion.

"I need t' buy my bo't back," Clem said, speaking over the breathy, choking sound of the engine as it refused to turn over. "Fer chrissakes, advance th' spahk!" he yelled to Good-Foot.

This time the starter caught and the engine chugged to life.

"As I was sayin'," Clem continued, "I need t' buy my bo't back."

Mordecai reacted to the statement with all the enthusiasm of a corpse. Clem waited, and when the mortician still didn't respond, he lamely held forth the money.

Mordecai's skeletal fingers delicately removed the bills from Clem's outstretched hand. He held the stack close to his ear and raked his thumb across it, aurally counting the money over the cacophony of the Knox Marine. Without a hint of fanfare he tucked the money into his coat pocket and said, "This will do. The boat is yours."

"It is?" Clem had expected haggling enough to befit a Yankee, but the mortician didn't seem interested in even making an obligatory show of it.

Mordecai gave a curt nod and that was all. With a second nod toward Good-Foot he said, "Cast off the bow."

Good-Foot cast off the bow, loosed the springer, and the *Yankee Reaper* chugged out into harbor.

Dunky and Clem looked at each other, then at Mordecai. "Where're we goin'?"

"Greasy Frog Light," answered Mordecai. By way of an explanation he added, "Steptoe died last night."

The two men reacted mildly. Steptoe was the assistant keeper of Greasy Frog Lighthouse and a friend of no one in particular. Somehow neither one of them had taken notice of the pine casket lying in the bilge of the *Yankee Reaper* until now.

"Wall, God rest his bones," Dunky eventually managed. "How's ol' Mesmeron takin it?"

Mordecai expressed his indifference by declining to answer. Instead he said, "We'll transfer the boat title back to your name upon our return, Mr. Crowder."

The *Yankee Reaper* slithered out of the harbor toward Greasy Frog Light. With blind resignation, Clem and Dunky settled in for the unexpected trip.

THE EXCURSION WAS nothing short of tedious. Clem and Dunky were subjected to countless tales of contract killings and prurient encounters, courtesy of Good-Foot Toussaint. At one point he even removed his shirt to reveal a body riddled with tattoos of stark naked women. When he flexed his muscles the women bumped and ground in suggestive and wholly inappropriate ways. Much to their dismay, Clem and Dunky were forced to view this tactless tattooed peepshow accompanied by Good-Foot's noxious cigarette smoke and boisterous laughter.

Mordecai had removed himself to the solitude of the prow, his still form looking for all the world like the figurehead of some ancient galleon. The mortician's black parasol arched over his head like stretched batwings, warding off the noonday sun.

Greasy Frog Lighthouse loomed large on the horizon. Clem ticked off the years since Mesmeron had been "appointed" her keeper. *Sentenced* was more like it, he mused. Had it really been that long ago? He realized nearly a score of years had passed since the days when Mesmeron Stoddard was First Selectman of Clapboard Island.

His election to the three-man Board of Selectmen had been fairly typical. Like every small town in New England, Clapboard Island had a Selectboard that was the executive branch of local government, with First Selectman being the chief executive officer. And like any selectman, Mesmeron provided general supervision and control over the town, enacted ordinances, regulations, and policies, oversaw town property and personnel, and managed the budget.

By all outward appearances, Mesmeron was the best selectman Clapboard ever had. But patriotic enthusiasm was not the motivational spark that propelled Mesmeron into office. Little did anyone realize how Machiavellian his ambitions truly were. Not until Clapboard's new First

Selectman dissolved the Selectboard and executed his *coup d'état*...or *coup d'île*, as it were...and established himself, in one fell swoop, as Principal Proprietary of Clapboard Island.

The town was in shock. By what authority Mesmeron exacted such a takeover, no one knew. His legal responsibilities were scattered throughout a perplexing web of statutes, bylaws, and home rule charter. Through sheer duplicity, and with the aid of his self-appointed Clerk of Writs, Mesmeron manipulated the bureaucratic entity and consolidated the normally circumscribed power of the committee-governed Town Meeting into his own tyrannical hands.

The townsfolk took immediate action. The constable posted the Town Meeting Warrant, which by law must precede the meeting by ten days, and waited. Hidden from the watchful eye of Clapboard's new Principal Proprietary, the townsfolk gathered in secret on the appointed day in Homer Cheatham's ciderhouse and plotted their insurgency.

What happened next would have swelled the First Fathers with pride. The townsfolk wrested control of the government back from their oppressor and proved that democracy was alive and able in the hands of an assemblage of tight-fisted New Englanders who kept their heritage well.

As for Mesmeron, his days of domination were finished. By decree of the reassembled Board of Selectmen, the fallen autocrat and his Clerk of Writs, Steptoe, were banished from Clapboard Island for all eternity. As retributory service, Mesmeron was condemned to the posting of lighthouse keeper at Greasy Frog, with Steptoe as his second.

Clem wondered how Mesmeron would fare now that Steptoe had passed on. Rather than dwell on it, he removed his latest scrimshaw piece from his pocket and began to work some finishing touches with his paring iron.

"*Alou-ette, gentille Alouette*," Good-Foot stood at the helm, singing. "*Alou-ette, je te plumerai! Je te plumerai la tête....*" He caught sight of Clem's scrimshaw and leaned in for a look.

Clem held forth his handiwork, eager for a sale.

"*Sacré Bleu!*" exclaimed Good-Foot, staring in horror at the scrimshaw. "What eez ze pope doing to zat caribou?"

"Pope!" yelled Clem. "That ain't no pope an that ain't no cary-boo, ye sightless idget. That's a pelican atop a bell buoy!"

Good-Foot picked up the scrimshaw and scrutinized it intently.

"Hnnh-HUNH!" he expressed, shaking his head. "You are too much, *m'sieur*." He tossed the scrimshaw overboard.

Clem leaned across the larboard, watching his ivory sculpture sink beneath the waves.

"Shame on yeou, Mr. Good-Foot," said Dunky, reaching into Clem's pocket and removing another scrimshaw piece. He hefted it for a moment, cocked his arm back and pitched the scrimshaw parallel to the ocean's surface. It skipped across the waves and disappeared into the horizon. "Ye shud nev-ah waste a good skimmin stone!"

Good-Foot saluted the impressive display with raucous laughter and a slap on the back.

Clem glared at the two men. He reached for the wheel, steadying the course of the *Yankee Reaper*, her skipper having abandoned the helm to commence another high-spirited round of *Alouette*.

"Wot's that damn ol' song mean, anyhow?" huffed Clem.

Good-Foot thought for a moment on the translation, then started to sing. "La-ark, kindly lark, I weell plu-uck you. I weell pluck you head..." Good-Foot removed Clem's hat and pinched little strands of his hair. "...I weell pluck you head..."

Clem snatched his hat back and swatted it at Good-Foot. "Wot's wrong with yeou! Get yer fing-ahs offa me. I shoulda had more sense than t' ask ye anyways!"

"I know a song better'n that one, Mr. Good-Foot," Dunky said, perceiving that Clem needed some relief.

"Ayuh, sing 'im a good 'un," Clem insisted. "Sing 'im... 'Th' Nine Brides o' Cap'n Hellenbach'!"

Dunky cleared his throat for the traditional sea chantey. He intoned the old sailor's work song with the vim and vigor of a seasoned sea minstrel. "The Nine Brides of Captain Hellenbach," once sung to enliven the deckhands' labor by marking rhythm, expounded the unusual deaths of each of the Captain's nine ladyloves. Good-Foot took to the song immediately and roared his approval.

"One fell in a fire, another two drowned; one choked on the pearl of an oyster she'd found," Dunky warbled like a consummate songster. "Sweet Mary succumbed to a slice of bad cheese, another was stung dead by bees...."

From somewhere in the wheelhouse, Good-Foot produced a fiddle and by the second refrain had joined the performance. Dunky hopped atop the pine casket and pummeled out a graceless Yankee jig, while Good-Foot laid into its Canadian equivalent. Mordecai glanced at the two revelers over his shoulder, a downward tautness about his mouth the only betrayal of his sentiment on such merrymaking.

"A spooked horse killed Sarah with trampling hooves; Clymenia was chased down and eaten by wolves," the two men sang, kicking their heels up in earnest. "The fate of the last is too gruesome to weather, her pieces weren't buried together!"

When the song was over, Dunky leaned heavily against the nearest gunwale, winded from the exertion. "Wa-al, now, Mr. Good-Foot, ye sure know how t' pick 'em up and put 'em down."

Good-Foot snarled with laughter. The hulking brute was surprisingly light on his feet for a man who looked to have the grace of a bull in a china shop. "*Merci, M'sieur* Drinkingwat-airs. You fonny song I like, me. Who ees zhese Capitaine To-'ell-an'-back, he huv no luck weeth ze ladies, eh?"

"Who, Cap'n Hellenbach?" Dunky asked, processing Good-Foot's accent more through inference than understanding. "Why, he's downright famous in these parts."

"Surprised ye ain't nev-ah heard th' tales," Clem added, "aft-ah slinkin aroun here all these years. Ye nev-ah heard tell o' th' legends 'bout Cap'n Hellenbach's demon ship, th' *Widowermaker*?"

Good-Foot shook his head.

"Wot 'bout th' Silent Woman," asked Dunky, "a headless appy-rition wot haunted th' cap'n to his dyin days? Or mebbe Cap'n Hellenbach's battle to th' death with th' Sea Crone — "

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Good-Foot, "ze Sea Crumb!"

"That's Sea Crone," Clem corrected.

"Zat ees what I sed, no?" Good-Foot grasped Clem's arm, genuine fear in his eyes. "When I was a leettle one, my papa, he tell me ze story of ze Sea Crumb."

"Oh, there's lotsa stories 'bout th' Sea Crone," Dunky replied. "She was Cap'n Hellenbach's sworn enemy. Why, there was th' time she — "

"*Taisez-vous!*" yelled Good-Foot, his voice trembling in anguish. "Don' speak on zhat ol' weetch, *m'sieur*! Ze Sea Crumb, her, she breeng

down ze curse when she hear her name speak! Ze sky ees get black all roun, an ze weend she blow like you nev-air see, an ze beeg storm come down as eef all ze devil on hell below, was tak' heem some fancy ride!"

"Kee-reist Almighty, I ain't seen a growed man so supy-stitious in all my born days," Clem said. "Why that ol' witch has been dead fer ov-ah a hunnerd years. Do ye really think bringin up her name is gonna — "

"Mebbe we shouldn'ta oughta talk 'bout her, Clem," said Dunky, clearly shaken by Good-Foot's notion of a curse. "Ye know, jus' t' be on th' safe side."

"I suggest we stop talking entirely," said Mordecai, lowering himself from his forward post. "Greasy Frog is upon us."

The lighthouse jutted over them like a graveyard monument. Mordecai folded his parasol, letting the long shadow of Greasy Frog fall across his mealworm skin. The mortician was out of his element on the open sea, preferring the dim light of his parlor and the safety of shadows, and looked even more relieved than Clem to have finally arrived. Good-Foot took the helm and aimed the *Yankee Reaper* toward the mooring buoy.

Clem let his gaze travel the towering length of the lighthouse. At the very top, he discerned what looked like a man pacing the circular walkway. He reached for the boat's storage compartment, found that his spyglass was still inside, and trained it on the distant figure.

Mesmeron. Clem hadn't laid eyes on the man in nearly twenty years, but his was a face one did not easily forget. Aristocratic in its own raw-boned way, with angular cheekbones and long beaked nose, it was the time-honored look of the Stoddards, a prominent Clapboard family that had renounced this particular relation years ago. But Mesmeron had an intensity about the eyes that was properly veiled in the rest of his kin. It was the look of overwhelming ambition.

Clem folded the spyglass, suddenly afraid that Mesmeron might look directly at him and know he was being watched. A cold chill bolted down his spine. Even today, Mesmeron's two-week reign of tyranny was referred to as the Fortnight of Fear.

The tiny figure of Mesmeron continued its march across the heights of the lighthouse, back and forth, pacing and plotting.

And eternally, inexorably, contriving his return.

The four men crowded around the front door of Greasy Frog Light, arms loaded down with what Mordecai called "the tools of his trade." Clem stared at the heavy brass doorknocker, a paganish creature with the forepart of a goat and the hindpart of a fish. With a brusque nod, Mordecai indicated that Clem should knock for admittance, as he was the only one who could easily free a hand.

Clem shifted the heavy satchel he was carrying to his offhand and seized the goatfish by the tail. He thudded the heinous creature sharply against the door.

"Ayuhsss?" cracked the sibilant voice of the man who answered. He was squat with a steeply humped back and eyeballs that bulged from his pug face like great boiled potatoes. He scrutinized the callers mistrustfully, or so it seemed; no one could really tell where the splayed eyes were focused.

"Steptoe!" Clem cried, stunned to be greeted by the very man they'd come here to bury.

Without any sign of acknowledgment, Mordecai pushed past the hunchback and into the lighthouse. Good-Foot followed suit, and their misshapen greeter scurried after them in haste. As things had progressed past the point of invitation, Clem and Dunky rushed in themselves.

"Thisss way, mortician, follow me," hissed the hunchback, scrambling to the front of the procession.

Clem looked questioningly at Dunky as the two marched double-time to keep up, and when Dunky failed to share in his confusion, he asked outright, "I thut Mordecai sed Steptoe was dead!"

"Walter Steptoe's th' one wot died, Clem," replied Dunky, an authority on the interrelatedness and goings-on of the local families. "This here's his son, Egil."

Clem nodded. Of course, he should have realized this man was altogether too young to be *the* Steptoe. As they tramped down the long corridor, Clem spied several other Steptoes in the adjoining rooms, all engaged in some manner of domestic service. Cooks and servers, housemaids and launderers, scuttling about with a single-mindedness to their individual tasks. Beyond a window Clem caught a glimpse of even more Steptoes tending a small vegetable garden, and several more pruning trees in an orchard. Every Steptoe, down to the last one, had the same splay-eyed

look, and those who weren't strictly hunchbacked were given to exceedingly poor posture.

"Them are sum apples wot didn' fall too far from th' tree," Clem commented on the staunch family resemblance. The number of Steptoes was so great that he suspected their ranks included cousins and nephews and nieces as well.

"Ayuh, they do favor, now that ye mention it," Dunky replied.

The long corridor gave way to a high-vaulted chamber. In the center was a large butcherblock table and on top of that was the prostrate form of old Steptoe.

Mordecai arrived first, right on the heels of young Steptoe, and set his two leather cases on the table. Good-Foot followed one step behind, dropping his heavy toolkit on the floor with a clank.

Clem and Dunky gathered as close as they dared. The corpse of Steptoe was still draped in his familiar black sackcloth — as were the rest of the Steptoe clan, Clem noted — but his cowl was now pulled back, revealing a shock-white head of hair and a tongue that lolled from his mouth like a colorless leech.

"Hmmm," Mordecai expressed his consternation, placing a finger to his lips in thought. He craned his neck as he studied the body from various angles.

Suddenly the double doors at the far end of the chamber flew open and slammed against the wall.

"Silence, you gabbling gaggle of galleyworms!" commanded Mesmeron from the doorway, though no one in the room had been speaking. His boots clicked against the marble floor in rapid succession as he marched directly toward them. Clem recoiled from the advancing figure, fearful of the impending confrontation. Fortunately, Mesmeron had targeted Mordecai as their ringleader. "What is the meaning of this unsolicited imposition!"

The two stood face to face, Mesmeron raising himself to his full stature and looking down at Mordecai along his sleek rapier nose, though the mortician's stovepipe hat gave him the ultimate height advantage. "I'm here to embalm your manservant," he said in his whispery, unflustered voice.

Mesmeron turned to Steptoe the younger. "Did you arrange this?"

"Ayuhsss, Mast-ah," he replied.

Ignoring the intrusion, Mordecai removed a measuring tape from his leather case and measured the distance from the tabletop to the peak of Steptoe's mountainous hump. "Hmmm," he expressed again, then signaled to Good-Foot. Good-Foot made a quick survey of the body and in one quick motion hammered his elbow down on the hump like a pile driver. The body gave a resounding crack and shifted downward. Mordecai measured again.

"Still won't fit," he sighed. "We'll have to modify the casket."

Good-Foot nodded, lighting a new cigarette from the dying embers of his old one.

"Very well," Mesmeron conceded, clearly annoyed by the bothersome triviality of it all. "But I'll have none of your lollygagging," he added, glaring at Good-Foot through his cloud of cigarette smoke. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Oui, *M'sieur* Moron."

"That's *Mes*-meron, you miserable miscreant."

Good-Foot casually sucked his cigarette. "Zhat ees what I sed, no?"

"No," confirmed Mesmeron, and with a flourish of the tail of his frockcoat he marched back toward the double doors. "Do not trifle with me, Mordecai," he threw back over his shoulder. "I want that corpse dispatched expeditiously!"

Clem hadn't drawn a breath since the moment Mesmeron stepped into the room. As he watched the intimidating figure withdraw toward the door, he felt relief wash over him.

Pausing just beyond the doorway, Mesmeron spun around and belted one final command to Mordecai, "Ex-ped-iti-ously!" in his most resonant pitch and timbre. He slammed the doors shut and was gone.

Good-Foot reached into his toolkit and pulled out an axe. "I zee one leettle pine tree when we first come, make mebbe t'ree or two new plank for ze cask-et. We beeld eet up tall and nice, eh? Here, *m'sieur* humpback," he said, handing a planer to Steptoe. "You lend you hand to Good-Foot."

"I'll help ye too, Mr. Good-Foot," said Dunky, grabbing a handful of nails and a hammer from the toolkit. "We'll build that pine box up right prop-ah."

The three men exited the way they had come, leaving Clem behind with Mordecai and the corpse. The mortician worked the tongue back into

the dead man's mouth and cinched his jaw shut with a cloth pulled tight under the chin and tied at the crown of the head. Mordecai smiled inwardly. He knew that a mouth closed this tightly would pucker the area under the nose and make the deceased appear to scowl at the mourners.

"Help me roll him over," he said to Clem, and together they got the body onto its front. Clem grimaced as the mortician directed him to massage the arms and legs to relieve rigor mortis. With a scalpel Mordecai made two small incisions at the base of the neck, one in the carotid artery and one in the jugular vein, and inserted tubes from the embalming fluid pump.

When Mordecai's back was turned, Clem quietly vacated the room. The thought of spending more time with Steptoe made him queasy, as did the notion of talking shop with Mordecai while three gallons of embalming fluid leisurely circulated through the remains.

Clem eased the door shut and looked around. He found himself in a room dominated by bookshelves, each stretching from floor to ceiling with a funny wheeled ladder for access to the higher reaches. A library, by the look of things, and a well stocked one at that.

He wasn't much of a reader, but Clem browsed the titles on the off chance that something might catch his fancy. The volumes were musty with age. He picked one out at random and thumbed through the yellowed pages. As near as he could tell, the book was eight hundred pages of gibberish.

He turned it over and looked at the cover. *Incantations of the Forbidden Arts*, it read. Clem's eyes widened and he carefully slid the book back on the shelf. He glanced over to the volume next to it. *Occulted Truths of Sorcery*, it read. Next were bound periodicals of *The Black Magic Dabbler*. And beside that was *Ancient and Modern Spells of Witchcraft*.

Witchcraft! Clem scanned the rest of the shelf and then the other shelves in the library. The entire collection seemed dedicated to the study of the occult in all its various forms. There were compilations from medieval charmbooks and ancient grimoires. Books on alchemy, astronomy, numerology, and other mystic sciences Clem had never heard of. Works about amulets, talismans, and voodoo ceremonies.

Clem never knew Mesmeron took such an interest in the occult. He

followed the collection from general reference to a more regional selection. Many of the works here were unpublished manuscripts and the incomplete notes of long-dead witch-authors. Clem hunkered down to examine the bottom shelf, his gaze traveling from volume to volume. A book titled *Scrimshaw and Runecraft* piqued his curiosity.

Scrimshaw! "Wa-al now, I know a li'l bit 'bout half of it," he said to himself, reaching for the leatherbound tome. Before his fingers touched the binding he caught sight of something that froze his hand in place.

Clem gasped in awe. Inches from the shelf stood a column of scrimshaw the likes of which he'd never seen. It was riddled with intertwined figures of mermaids and sea dragons, all intricately fashioned in exacting detail. Only a scrimshander worth his salt could craft something so meticulous, Clem knew. Someone like his grampappy. Actually, now that he looked at it, the piece did seem vaguely familiar. In fact, if he didn't know better, he would swear it was his grampappy's —

The scrimshaw column swung out and caught Clem across the chin. He flew back, crashing into a rack of astrological charts.

"Yer a goddamn come-down, lad, swifter'n a slide from th' foretop down th' whole length o' th' boomstay," said a voice from the past.

Clem parted the paper charts covering his head and stared at the stooped old man before him. He was weathered like a rawhide lashing and the stump of one leg was masted with the scrimshaw column. Clem cursed his mind's developing ability to conjure up imaginary advisors and manifest them in such volatile form. Just as the figments of his wife and pappy had done before, Peleg Crowder, his late grampappy, had come to proffer opinions of his own.

"Git ap, ye glarssy-arsed niddy-noddy!" barked the old geezer, thumping his peg leg against the floor. "Ye guts a score needs rectifyin'."

Clem untangled himself from the chart rack. When Clem was a child, the only thing that rivaled his father's menacing hook for the fear of God was the solid kick of his grampappy's imitation leg. With strong trepidation, Clem addressed the old man. "Ye sed a score, grampappy?"

"Aye-yeah, a score," sneered Peleg. "With th' barstid wot took Clardius from ye!"

"Wall now, he didn't so much *take* 'im from me," Clem admitted reluctantly, "as *buy* 'im off me."

"It don't make no damn's-odds wot he done," snarled Peleg. "Ye jus' bait-iron th' christless barstid an git Clardius back, ye hear me?"

If Clem understood his grampappy correctly, and he was certain he did, the old coot was actually suggesting he commit murder to get Clawdus back in his possession. "Now that's goin a mite far, Grampappy...."

"Wa-al, hain't yeou bungs up and bilge free," chided Peleg, invoking an old nautical expression reserved for those acting a bit sanctimonious. Without warning the old man reared back and rammed his peg leg into Clem's belly, followed by a double-fisted wallop to the back of the neck. "Don't git squamish on me, lad! I'd do it meself, if'n Ol' Scritch hadn'ta snatchblocked me to an early fare-thee-well!"

In his heyday it was said that Peg-Legged Peleg could kick more ass with his stumpy leg than most men could with two. Clem believed every word of it. Raising himself from the floor, he knew it was time to push away his fear and ask the question that had plagued his mind all day. "Why, Grampappy? Why's Clawdus so all-fired import'nt?"

Peleg turned wistful, his anger deflating as if the question itself had bled the wind from his sails. Times long past played across his faded eyes as he mindlessly chewed his gums in the manner of toothless old men all over the world. "That lop-stah's been in th' fam'bly fer a goodly time, lad," wheezed the old codger. "T'was my own pappy wot passed 'im t' me, an he guts 'im from his pappy, an it was *his* grampappy wot fished 'im outta th' drink."

"Gorry," Clem whispered. He had no idea the lobster had been passed through so many generations, or that Clawdus was so advanced in years. "Who were he, grampappy? Who were th' man wot fished 'im up?"

"His name were Hatevil Crowd-ah," rasped Peleg. "Or so sed them wot knowed. T'were afore my time, goddamn ye. He were a Puritan man, an them Puritans were God-fearin', Divil-fearin', an ever'thin'-b'twix'-th'-two-fearin'. T'were that fear, they sez, wot 'llowed Hatevil t' see Clardius fer his true se'f."

"His true se'f? Wot were he, grampappy?" asked Clem.

"I'm a-gittin' t' that, so quite sarsin' me! Hatevil were a fishin man, an mebbe even th' world's firs' true lop-stahman. An he didn' hook his lop-stahs with no crook-staff like them filthy Norsemen, neith-ah! Nawsir, he

sot a trap right prop-ah. Dutch eelpot, t'were, fines' kind in th' colonies. Nawthin' like them hoop nets, though, god rot yer hide, th' kind we used when I were a whelp...how them things fished! Ye rememb-ah them, laddie?"

"Grampappy, wot 'bout Clawdus?" Clem replied, determined to keep the old man on track even if it incurred his wrath.

"Clardius? Why, that ol' Hatevil pulled his eelpot one day an thar he were! Blue as th' briny sea, goddamn ye, though he weren't so lahe as he is now. Course when I were a whelp t'weren't uncommon t' haul five-er six-footers with them hoop nets. Didja know that, laddie?"

"Clawdus, Grampappy!" Clem insisted.

"Yer bringin' out m' narsty side, god rot yer eyes! As I were sayin', when Hatevil pulled Clardius from that eelpot, a shaft o' light broke through th' heavens an shone on that blue shell, jus' like in th' Scriptures. Bein' a Puritan, an mebbe even a reverend, Hatevil knowed wot it meant."

"Gorry," Clem gulped. "Wot did it mean?"

"Prog-norsty-ca'shun," Peleg announced, pointing a finger in the air. "A sign from Above!"

Clem was awestruck. Prognostication. It was hard to believe. His Clawdus, the lazy-shelled, bottom-feeding ingrate that had lolled so listlessly in its wetmack for years on end, was a living prophesy of things to come. Clem reeled from the very notion. The past enfolding the future, intertwined with the present, entangled with the fate of a single lobster. That which was implied, from which an inference could be drawn, was affected by the actions of a lone lobsterman. Or something like that. Clem felt dizzy.

The universe was so very large and so very small all at once. Suddenly it occurred to Clem that the figments plaguing his mind might not be the product of his imagination after all, an imagination that had never been remarkably creative in the past, but a vision induced by Clawdus himself. The lobster, directing its own rescue, fulfilling its own destiny.

Clawdus. An omen. Of what? When at last he found his voice, he forced the question from his lips. "Wot's he prognosticatin', 'xactly?"

Peleg chewed his gums like an ancient muse. "Th' comin' battle o' Good versy Evil, lad. That's why he's so impert'nt, goddamn yer bones."

"Good an Evil...", whispered Clem.

Peleg bowed his head. "Git 'im back, Clem. Don' let nawthin' nor nobody stand in yer way. Hain't no sacry-fice too big." He held out his artificial leg. "Do ye know how I cum t' be dismasted, laddie?"

Clem nodded solemnly, recalling his father's hand. "T'were Clawdus, weren't it, Grampappy?"

"Clardius!" roared Peleg. The old man jerked his leg up and drove his sharp peg down on Clem's foot, then caught him with a right hook across the chin. "Who ev-ah heard of a goddamn lop-stah takin' a man's leg!"

Clem flew back and crashed against a bookcase, causing it to rock overhead dangerously.

"T'were a shahk wot dismasted me, goddamn ye! Let that be a lessin fer ye," growled the old man. "Ye gotta be aggrissive jus' like that shahk if'n yer gonna git Clardius back!"

The teetering bookcase finally gave way, pummeling Clem with arcane compendia. For a brief moment his vision blurred as he neared the point of unconsciousness. Flat on his back, he pushed blindly at the pile of books that weighted him down, forcing his eyes to refocus. One book lay open across his broad belly, canted from his line of sight, but he could still make out the chapter heading.

The Blue Lobster Prophecy, it read, written in blood-red letters.

Clem struggled for breath. "Grampappy! This book, it's 'bout th'...."

The place where his grandfather had stood just moments ago was empty. Farther back, in the doorway, stood another.

"What is the meaning of this!" demanded Mesmeron. His eyes bored through the room and into the panic center of Clem's brain.

Clem clambered to his feet. He righted the bookcase and began shoving the loose manuscripts back into the shelves. "Gorry, I didn' touch nawthin', I were jus' perusin' yer book pantry when this ol' shelf cum a-tumblin' down —"

"Silence, wastrel!" Mesmeron advanced across the room. "I'll have none of your duncery!"

"Nawssir, I wudn't —"

"The least of these books is beyond your feeble comprehension!" Mesmeron snatched the one book Clem held tight against his chest.

"Nawssir, I mean yassir, but that one book there, ye see, might help ol' Clawdus —"

"Tut!" Mesmeron exclaimed. "'Old Claudius' will have to look elsewhere, I'm afraid! Nothing here to help 'Old Claudius'!" It dawned on him that he was unfamiliar with the object of his contempt. "Who, pray tell, is 'Old Claudius'?"

The truth of it felt foolish, but Clem was too nervous to play fast and loose with the facts. "Wall, sir, he's nawthin' but a blue lop-stah, act'ally, but he's sorta like a pet t' me...."

"Blue...lobster?" Mesmeron held up the book he'd snatched from Clem's hands. He gasped at the title. *The Sea Crone and the Omens of Her Return!* With uncanny precision he snapped it open to the chapter on the "Blue Lobster Prophecy."

With Mesmeron's attention firmly focused on the book, Clem sidled toward the door. Prophecy or no, the tension in the room was too great for his nerves, and on second thought, he doubted the book could solve his predicament anyway.

Mesmeron caught the motion from the corner of his eye. "Sit!" he commanded, his finger stabbing toward a chair at the reading table. Clem sat.

"Claudius, did you say?"

"Ayuh, Clawdus."

"Let us see...." Mesmeron traced his finger down the page. "Hail the Caesar of the Deep," he read aloud, "for he shall herald the return of the Sibyl of Maine."

Mesmeron turned to Clem. "Caesar of the Deep...your Claudius was named after the fourth emperor of Rome, no doubt."

"Nawssir," Clem said. "He were named Clawdus 'cause he gut them big pinch-ahs." He demonstrated with his hands, working them like claws.

"Yes, yes...silence, you mental midget...," Mesmeron said, engrossed once again in his reading. "See here...you shall know the hour of my return by this sign...the turn of the Caesar from blue to red...an obvious reference to lobster when boiled...and be it known that whosoever slays the Sovereign shall be endowed with the power...the power of the Sea Crone!"

Mesmeron snapped the book shut. He smiled like a snake unhinging its jaw to swallow prey. "The power of the Sea Crone, for the one who facilitates her return! By all that's fair and foul, do you know what this means?"

"Nawssir," Clem said.

"Of course you don't, you incogitant crustacean catcher," Mesmeron replied. He was wild-eyed and giddy, and a chuckle escaped from somewhere deep in his chest. "Your minuscule mentality couldn't possibly grasp the ramifications of such informatory consequence. With this power under my command I could reinstate my principal proprietorship of Clapboard Island!"

Decades-old machinations of immeasurable intricacy flashed through Mesmeron's eyes. He paced in front of the reading table, gesticulating with dramatic flare. "Once my position is secured there I can launch my campaign against the mainland!"

He paused across the table from Clem, his gaping smile almost frothy with excitement. "From there I can take the county seat and then the county itself, and from *there* the entire state of Maine, and from *there*..."

Mesmeron arched his eyebrows, and Clem felt he was being prompted to complete some inevitable progression. When he failed to venture a guess, Mesmeron thrust his hand skyward, grasped a handful of air, and finished it himself. "...Massachusetts!"

Clem sat motionless. He was certain Mesmeron expected some sort of response — after all, the man kept wagging his eyebrows and staring at him with those intense scrutinous eyes. Clem thought it over and asked, "Wot 'bout New Hamp-sheer?"

"New...Hampshire...", Mesmeron repeated. His lips hung flaccid, but only for a moment. The next instant his face was twisting into a horrendous mask of wild rage. He slammed his hands down on the table and plunged his face within inches of Clem's own. "What on *Earth*," he screamed, flecks of spittle finding their way past his tightly clenched teeth, "would I want with New Hampshire!"

Clem hugged the back of his chair. "I — I dunno," he stammered, "thut mebbe ye'd need it, t' sorta link them other two togeth-ah —"

"Silence, you ignominious incarnation of imbecility!" Mesmeron gnashed his teeth in anguish, his eyes squeezing tight like a man fending off a headache. "No, no...yes! Massachusetts!" he proclaimed once again, having worked his mind around his fury.

Clem fidgeted in his chair. Mesmeron flashed his long white teeth at him in a most ingratiating smile. "Tell me, this blue lobster of yours, you said you keep it as some sort of barnyard animal?"

"Nawssir, I said he were more like a pet."

"How enlightening. And this pet, it is lying about your domicile as we speak?"

Clem shook his head. "That's wot I were sayin 'bout that book o' yers helpin' Clawdus. A Texan feller's gonna barby-cue 'im at this big to-do on Satidy."

"Dastard! He must be stopped at all costs!" Mesmeron reestablished his smile and firmly placed his hand on Clem's shoulder. "Rest assured, my sufferable acquaintance, I'll not allow Old Claudius to be reduced to some mere culinary compost. The wheels are in motion as we speak. At long last, the culmination of my time, means, and considerable talents has come to this..." Mesmeron grabbed another handful of air "...the fruition of my intent!" A rich diabolical laugh flowed naturally past his lips.

Clem joined in with some laughter of his own, though it was weak and confused. The two spurred each other on until Mesmeron's baritone hysterics ended in a startling choke. He stared wide-eyed at a dark shadow near the doorway.

Clem saw it too. A movement, then a face, white like the powder of mothwings. It emerged from the shadows, watching them from under a black stovepipe hat.

"How long have you stood there, you meddlesome mortician!" Mesmeron said.

Mordecai studied Mesmeron for several long seconds, then shifted his squinted reptilian eyes on Clem and studied him as well. "Not long enough, I suspect. What were the two of you discussing?"

"The audacity!" Mesmeron bellowed. "I'll not be questioned in the sanctum sanctorum of my own lighthouse, you insolent fool. If your work is done, gather your rabble and vacate the premises immediately!"

Mordecai studied him for several moments longer. "Very well," he eventually said. "Mr. Crowder, come along."

Clem was more than ready to vacate the premises. He fell in step behind the mortician and was almost through the library door when Mesmeron gripped his shoulder once again. "Begin organizing at all levels," he whispered into his ear. "Leave the rest to me!"

Their departure from Greasy Frog Light was uneventful. Mordecai remained in the wheelhouse, discussing burial arrangements with Good-Foot Toussaint. Clem and Dunky sat quietly in the back, watching the lighthouse fade beyond an incoming fogbank.

"Don't know how Mesmeron will manage without ol' Steptoe aroun," Dunky lamented.

"He'll make do," Clem replied. "I run into him in th' book pantry, an it sounds like he's gut irons in th' fire enuff t' keep 'im busy."

"Oh yeah, ye talked t' Mesmeron? Wot'd he have t' say?"

"Yes, Mr. Crowder," Mordecai butted in, poking his head between the two. "What did he have to say?"

Clem's face screwed up as he recalled the confusing conversation. "Sumthin' 'bout runnin' fer office agin, down t' Massy-chusetts, I think."

Dunky rolled his eyes toward Mordecai. "Yeou know ol' Mesmeron, he loves talkin' politics."

"Yes," said Mordecai, "politics. What else did he say?"

"Wall now, truth be known, I don't catch but half o' wot that man says, really...."

Dunky shook his head. "Not with all them five-dollar words he uses...."

"But I swore he sed sumthin' 'bout helpin' me git Clawdius back."

"Mesmeron," said Mordecai, "helping you."

"Ayuh." Clem shook his head, confounded by several statements that were made. "He told me to staht organizin at ev'ry level, an he'd take care o' th' rest."

Mordecai pulled back. Clem and Dunky fell silent, watching the rolling of the sea, oblivious to the nonverbal exchange between the mortician and his conniving half-brother.

SATURDAY'S BIG TO-DO was more of a business meeting than a social gathering, which suited Clem just fine. He'd invited Dunky under the assumption that each guest could bring one of their own, and set him working the crowd with the gunnysack of scrimshaw artwork, which had been specially priced to attract buyers. So far there were none.

Not to say there wasn't a great amount of wheeling and dealing going

on. Every Clapboard Islander of affluence, influence, and consequence was at hand with the hardnosed agenda of doing big business. They circled the Texas millionaire like gulls around a bait bucket.

As expected, Clem was intermittently badgered by the Selectmen and their Town Meeting Regime. The ranks of the municipal government were uncharacteristically inflated for such a small town, and had been ever since the Fortnight of Fear. The selectmen were now joined by aldermen, a mayor, and several other officers and functionaries, all oddly layered in their responsibilities to prevent such a thing as Mesmeron's takeover from ever happening again.

And to top it all, Clem's plan to offer substitutes for Clawdus was a bust. Tex had as little interest in the kettleful of normal-sized, green lobsters as he did in the normal-sized, green monetary offer. "We got crawdaddies like that in Texas, Son," Tex duly informed him.

Thwarted again, Clem picked up the heavy kettle to haul it away. "Hear tell all ye gut in Texas are cows and funny men."

"No, no, Son...yew got it wrong," Tex corrected. "All we got in Texas are 'steers' and 'queers.'"

"If yeou say so, Junior," Clem replied.

The midpoint of the pier was occupied by an ornamented aquarium, and if there was said to be a centerpiece to the Big To-Do at all, it was this. Clawdus lay at ease inside, his beady stalked eyes watching agog the steady stream of passersby. He held a generous serving of caviar in one huge armored fist as a flurry of mandibles and maxillae passed tiny bite-sized portions of it into his mouth. By all outward appearances, he was unaware that the meal was meant to be his last.

From time to time, Dunky would meander past the aquarium with an affected casualness, ready to snatch the lobster and make a run for it if the situation presented itself. Captain Sane apparently suspected as much. He and his ventriloquist dummy clung to the aquarium like a vigilant barnacle.

"Whoo-weee, that's one Texas-sized crawdaddy, pardner, no two ways about it," Tex said. He wrapped his arm around Dunky and offered him one of the hand-rolled Cubans he'd been passing out all afternoon. "That's how we like things back home, Son. Why, Ah can drive mah truck all day and not get from one end of mah ranch to the other."

Dunky puffed his cigar. "I had a truck like that once, Mr. Tex."

The three selectmen quickly unified around the aquarium, proficiently edging Dunky to the back. Tex had yet to pronounce his decision on the south shore resort, and they were keen on reducing his exposure to any local nuisance until he had.

In fact Tex had refused to talk business all afternoon, preferring to wait until after the meal was served and settled. His own internal clock told him the time was fast approaching. He winked at the selectmen, pulled Clawdus from the aquarium, and shouted over the gathering, "Shit fire and save the matches, boys! We're gonna have us a barbecue!"

A cheer rose up from the crowd, more out of deference than any real desire to try lobster prepared in such a way. Tex proudly displayed a fire engine red mason jar full of his homemade barbecue sauce.

"Uh, Mr. Tex," Dunky said, tugging at the man's elbow. "I think someone fergut t' tell th' cook this were a barby-cue. He set th' wat-ah a-boilin."

"Do what?" Tex looked around. Sure enough, down on the sandy shore, his grill had been replaced by an enormous black kettle. The cook hunched over the bubbling water, stirring and singing some incomprehensible tune. More like chanting, thought Tex, and he knew this wasn't the man he'd hired for the job. The cook peeked out from under his cowl with a face like two hardboiled eggs wedged in porridge.

The selectmen drew together. Dunmore swallowed hard. "Steptoe?"

"It can't be," stammered Moody.

Pratt's lower lip quivered. "That would mean...."

Suddenly a great creaking groan came from behind them, and the boards trembled beneath their feet. Everyone spun around to face the sound.

From the end of the pier a platform hinged upward, its lone occupant rising perpendicular to the horizon. The effect was much like how one might imagine a corpse ascending from its coffin. When the motion was complete, Mesmeron stood triumphantly before the stunned crowd. No sooner had he thrown his arms wide than Greasy Frog Lighthouse let out its low, sonorous croak and its great beam commenced to sweep across the landscape. Mesmeron broke into his pit viper smile at the impeccable timing of his own device.

The crowd was aghast. Mesmeron stepped from the platform and marched briskly toward the selectmen.

"Ye, ye can't be here, Mesmeron," Dunmore spluttered.

"Ye ain't allowed," Moody added.

"Not on Clabber...."

"Silence, you pusillanimous pack of politicasters!" Mesmeron commanded. "Your regency of mediocrity has ended. From this moment onward Clapboard Island will submit to the reestablished dominion of its incontestable subjugator."

The selectmen were frantic. "But, ye ain't gut th' author'ty t' take back Clabber! We made sure — "

"Spare me your expostulatory drivel. In a few scant moments I'll have jurisdiction enough."

"What — in — Tarnation...!" Tex drawled in absolute bewilderment. He looked for an explanation in the frightened faces of the townsfolk and found none. "Lookee here, pardner," he said, addressing Mesmeron directly. "Ah hate to rain on yore parade, but this li'l shindig is invite only...and Ah don't recall seein *yore* name on the guest list!"

Mesmeron affronted the Texan, raising himself to his full height and sighting him along his aquiline nose. The broad brim of the ten-gallon hat obstructed his view, and he had to pull back slightly to fix Tex with his penetrating glare. "No, no, no, you hebetudinous heifer herder, you have it all wrong...it is *I* who have invited you. Or, more explicitly..." his attention shifted to the lobster cradled in Tex's arm "...you!"

Mesmeron relieved Tex of the lobster in such an offhanded manner that no resistance was offered whatsoever. Tex was dumbfounded. He huffed in exasperation, barely able to speak. "Ah'm a-fixin' ta clean yore plow, cowpoke!"

"Cowpoke indeed!" Mesmeron whirled around and bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Seize them!"

A dozen Steptoes clambered onto the pier and grabbed hold of Tex and the selectmen. The assiduous hunchbacks, who had presumably facilitated Mesmeron's grand entrance from their hiding place under the pier by manning the block-and-tackle that raised his platform, swiftly subdued the crowd with the element of surprise.

With a flit of his hand Mesmeron cleared a path through the crowd.

His long, lofty gait brought him past the mayor, the aldermen, and even his kinfolk, the Stoddards, who averted their eyes as he swaggered by. His course cut a swath directly toward Clem Crowder.

"Gorry, I don't know how t' thank ye," Clem said, reaching out to take Clawdus.

Mesmeron passed him by without a hint of recognition. His bearing took him beyond the crowd and down onto the beach where he positioned himself behind the huge boiling kettle. The Steptoe who had been stirring and chanting over it, no doubt preparing it for some nefarious purpose by the means of black art, stood silently beside his master, veiled under the shadow of his hood.

"Clapboard Island," Mesmeron's distinct utterance carried over the throng. All eyes were on him, and nothing under the sun could stop him from addressing such a rapt audience. "You are about to bear witness to an event of vast, nay, *monumental* import, an extravaganza of eminence, if you will, the likes of which are irrefutably unparalleled in the arena of the, shall we say, mundane. It is not the restitution of your Principal Proprietary that I speak of, though this too shall pass as a matter of consequence, and not without a certain amount of indemnification, I might add, for subjected indignities and other such precedents. Nor do I refer to the denouement of the establishment as it stands, namely, the bureaucratic bunglers responsible for the present exigency of affairs and the abject condition in which Clapboard Island finds itself."

The selectmen turned beet red, certain that Mesmeron had just referred to their administration.

"No, no, I allude to nothing so commonplace," Mesmeron chuckled, a firm indication that his evil laugh was in the making. "The event you are to behold forthwith will tear asunder the very notion of conventionality, to such a degree that I dare say the greater part of you will indubitably fail to grasp the preponderance of it.

"For those with a simpler bent of mind, let me spell it out." Mesmeron lifted Clawdus high into the air. "I hold in my hands the instrument of prophecy! It has been written, and I quote, 'whosoever slays the Sovereign shall be endowed with the power...' " with one outstretched arm he swung Clawdus out over the steaming kettle "...the power of the Sea Crone!"

The crowd gasped, much to Mesmeron's delight.

"Destiny has run its inexorable course. Its juncture with fate is here, now. By inevitable necessity I stand at the crux. The power of the Sea Crone is mine to command!"

The laugh came now, full blown, heaving with wicked intent. "Mmmwwhaa, ha, ha, ha, ha — " finger by finger Mesmeron loosed his grip on the lobster " — ha, ha, ha, ha, ha — Ack!"

A hand flew out from the hooded figure beside him and clenched around his throat like a vice grip, cutting his air off mid-laugh. "Where you go so fast, eh, *M'sieur* Moron?" asked a gravelly voice.

Wild-eyed with fear, Mesmeron glanced down at the massive tattooed arm that led from his throat to the familiar black cloak. With his other hand the figure yanked back his hood and grinned at Mesmeron around the stubby remains of a cigarette butt. "You expecting mebbe you leettle humpback friend?"

Mesmeron blanched at the sight of Good-Foot Toussaint. His company of Steptoes reacted instantly, circling inward to rescue their master.

"Unhand me this instant, you troublesome troglodyte, or I'll have you kaaaa...!" Mesmeron's order was throttled as Good-Foot tightened his grip. The Steptoes froze in place, unwilling to incite any further harm against their master.

From the shadow of a dock piling emerged the mortician. Mordecai Malbon glided across the sand and joined his half-brother by the steaming kettle. "Give that here," he said, plucking the lobster from Mesmeron's hand.

"Let's see, how did that go?" said Mordecai. He swung Clawdius out over the boiling water. "Whosoever slays the Sovereign shall be endowed with the power of the Sea Crone, as I recall."

A distant thunder rumbled over the open sea. From out of nowhere a thick fog rolled into the harbor, reducing the effulgent eye of Greasy Frog to a dim and heartless light.

"Mordecai," gasped Mesmeron. He clawed at Good-Foot's fingers to allow more air into his lungs. "You're dealing with powers you couldn't possibly understand!"

"We shall see," said the mortician.

"Look!" screamed a voice from the crowd.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Good-Foot. "Zhe Sea Crumb!"

Out of the fog materialized a masted ship with tattered sails, its rigging creaking in the deadened air. Such a ship had haunted the shores of Maine a hundred years ago, and now her mistress had returned to carry on her evil legacy.

"Noooo!" shouted Dunky. He pushed through the crowd and charged the mortician. With all his might he swung the sack of scrimshaw, catching Mordecai in the midsection and knocking him to the ground. Clawdius soared straight up through the air and landed in Dunky's arms.

Mesmeron pulled free from Good-Foot's fear-weakened grip and bolted toward the Steptoes. "Seize that underhanded undertaker!" he shouted.

But it was too late. Dunky had the lobster and he was off on a dead run. "I gut 'im, Clem, I gut 'im!" he shouted.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. Everyone seemed to move at once, some toward the lobster, others away from it.

"Crawdad rustlers!" Tex exclaimed, the events of the past few minutes finally settling into his mind. He launched from the pier and landed squarely on Clem's back. Clem staggered momentarily from the weight, then jerked upright as Tex's spurs jabbed into his sides. Clem let out a yelp and took off.

Dunky raced down the beach, dodging and darting through the crowd. He was almost past the pier when he ran headlong into the selectmen. Moody stuck out his foot, catching Dunky at the ankle, and Dunmore snagged the lobster as it tumbled through the air.

"We gut it, Tex!" shouted Dunmore. He tucked Clawdius under his arm and the three selectmen took off toward the Texan. "Fire up th' barby-cue, we're a-comin!"

A band of Steptoes fell on the selectmen and wrestled the lobster from their possession. They scurried toward the kettle, nearly running on all fours in their haste.

"Bring it here, you fools, bring it here!" shouted Mesmeron. He snatched the lobster up and fumbled it toward the boiling water. Suddenly a sharp pain shot up from the back of his leg and he screamed in agony.

Captain Sane lay on the ground by the kettle, his ventriloquist dummy sinking its wooden teeth into Mesmeron's thigh.

"Yew git 'im, Geppetto!" hollered Tex from his position on Clem's

back. He kicked his spurs into Clem's sides and guided him toward the lobster.

Captain Sane caught Clawdius as he fell from Mesmeron's grasp. As fast as his old legs would carry him he hobbled toward the barbecue pit the selectmen were only now stoking to life. "Bring on th' barby-cue sauce, Tex!" they shouted.

Mordecai toppled Captain Sane with the hooked end of his sun parasol. He picked up the lobster and fended off two Steptoes, thwacking one across the back of the neck with his parasol and jabbing the other in the eye, but a third Steptoe managed to subdue him with a right cross. The hunchbacks gathered up the lobster and scampered up the beach.

Mesmeron waved his minions back to the kettle. Dunky stepped out in front of him and squared off. "I didn't wanna have t' do this, Mesmeron," he said, holding his fists out in front of him. "Put up yer dukes!"

"Away with your pitiable dukes!" Mesmeron insisted, his eyes focused on the approaching blue lobster.

Several paces shy of his master Steptoe was violently seized by Good-Foot Toussaint. He lifted the hunchback over his head and heaved him toward the other Steptoes, bowling them over like tenpins. Good-Foot picked up the lobster and headed for the pier.

Clem poured with sweat as he galloped across the beach, driven by the two-hundred-and-fifty pound man on his back. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the Sea Crone's ghostly ship, closer now but still indistinct in the fog.

Tex steered Clem onto the long pier, hot on the heels of Good-Foot. Mordecai stood at the far end, beckoning Good-Foot to make haste. He pointed the tip of his parasol down toward the water, indicating the *Yankee Reaper* moored below.

Good-Foot paused a few yards from Mordecai and turned to face his pursuers. Shifting Clawdius to the crook of his arm, he reached down and pulled out his long bowie knife.

Clem froze in place. Good-Foot motioned him on with the tip of his knife, obviously relishing the thought of shedding blood. The Sea Crone's ship loomed behind him, slithering ever closer to the pier. Clem flinched from the jolting spurs of his rider but his legs refused to carry him forward, no matter how much he wanted Clawdius back.

Clem spun around, ready to race back down the pier, only to learn that his way was now blocked. The figment of Mrs. Crowder glared at him from over her half-rim glasses, a rolling pin clutched in her hand. To her left, Codhook Crowder shook his gleaming hook in the air, and to her right Peg-Legged Peleg stomped his ivory appendage against the planks.

Clem reared back, knowing all too well how physical these manifestations could be. Tex's spurs drove painfully into his sides, demanding action, and no amount of bucking could unseat him. Clem spun around and faced the tip of Good-Foot's knife.

He didn't have time to settle on a course of action. A Steptoe boarded the *Yankee Reaper* and cranked her to life. The boat chugged across the harbor, jerking back when it reached the end of its mooring line. With a wrenching yawn the great piling yanked loose and the pier listed to one side.

Thrown off balance, Good-Foot slammed hard against the deck and slid toward the edge of the pier, Clawdus slipping loose from his grasp. Mordecai and Tex moved at once, both reaching for Clawdus from opposite directions. Before either one could grab him Clem's kettle of substitutes spilled over and dozens of lobsters skidded across the pier, obscuring Clawdus in a mound of shellfish.

With one final shudder the end of the pier collapsed and everyone toppled into the sea. They hit the water tussling, every free hand reaching for lobsters in hopes of nabbing the right one.

Lightning zagged across the darkening sky. The Sea Crone's ship drifted closer, sidling up alongside the remains of the pier, her tattered sails whipping in the wind.

Whitecaps lashed against the shoreline. A heavy wave heaved Tex ashore like a beached whale, and the next deposited Mordecai like so much seaweed.

Coughing the water from his lungs, the mortician reached into the deep recess of his stovepipe hat and pulled out a lobster. To his disappointment it was small and green.

Tex eagerly upturned his own hat, but there was nothing inside. "Just mah luck," he grumbled. "Swim through a pool fulla titties and come out suckin mah thumb!"

"How colloquial," said Mordecai. Another wave surged up the beach, rolling Clem in with it. Clawdus was clutched tightly in his hands.

A long shadow fell across them before they could react.

"My, my, my," Mesmeron sneered. "Look what the proverbial cat dragged in. What a fortuitous concurrence of circumstances." He pried the lobster from Clem's cold hands. "A man of eminent good sense is seldom blessed with such noble fortune."

Mesmeron raced for the kettle, shouting "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark!" He held Clawdus over the boiling water. "'Tis but a base, ignoble mind that mounts no higher than a bird can soar!"

"Doggone, Ah swear that boy thinks the sun come up just to hear 'im crow!" Tex wheezed. He staggered to his feet and rolled his waterlogged body toward the barbecue pit. "Somebody put the kibosh on that jabber-jawin' buckaroo!" he shouted to the selectmen.

But no one was close at hand. Dunky reached into his gunnysack and pulled out a scrimshaw piece. As a child he'd spent hours skimming stones across the bay, and even today he was known as the best stone-skimmer on Clapboard Island. He hefted the ivory nugget for a moment, then fired it into the air.

The scrimshaw cracked Mesmeron hard on the wrist. He flung Clawdus into the air with a howl of pain. The second scrimshaw caught him between the eyes, dropping him where he stood.

Dunky bolted for the kettle. A mob of hunchbacks converged on him, but he managed to ward off his interceptors with an air strike of scrimshaw. When his ammunition was gone he scooped Clawdus into the empty gunnysack and made a run for it.

Clem coughed up the seawater that saturated his lungs. He rolled himself over, and through bleary eyes took in the scene. The phantom ship had now docked at what remained of the pier, and he thought he saw movement in the gangway. Up on the beach, Dunky was running for all his worth one moment, the gunnysack tucked under his arm, and the next he was face-first in the sand, having run afoul of Captain Sane, who chopped him on the back of the neck with a well-swung oar. The captain picked up the gunnysack bundle and hoofed it toward the barbecue pit.

Clem knew Clawdus must be wrapped up inside. Inch by inch he

staggered to his feet. Images flashed before his eyes, fleeting and desperate, and voices too, urging him on. "Git a-movin, god rot yer eyes!" "Yeou fetch that lop-stah, Mr. Crowd-ah!" "Or I'll gut ye from stem t' sternpost!" More than ever he was convinced that Clawdus was the source of the figments, a supernatural instinct for self-preservation, a means of pressing his master into service.

With the last of his strength, Clem trudged across the sand in pursuit of Captain Sane. He caught up to the elderly man about midway to the barbecue pit. From some inner source he found the power to yank the gunnysack from the captain's arms.

Clem turned and ran. Away from the pier, away from the crowds, away from everything and everyone that might come between him and his lobster. Faster and faster he moved down the beach, the strength returning to his limbs with every new step. Firm determination was the wind at his back. His resolve was almost tangible. Nothing could stop him now.

"We're gonna make it!" he cried to the gunnysack. His lips quivered with exhilaration. "By the Good Lord Harry we're gonna make it, Clawdus! Clawdus!"

Clem pulled back the loose folds of the gunnysack and gasped. A ventriloquist dummy lay inside.

He spun around and stared at the far end of the beach. Captain Sane was hobbling his final steps to the barbecue pit. Tex was there waiting, a grin stretched from ear to ear, the mason jar of barbecue sauce poised garishly in his upraised hand. Captain Sane lifted Clawdus high into the air for all the world to see.

Clem let the ventriloquist dummy fall from his hands. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been duped by the old bait-and-switch, but he was certain it wasn't at the hands of someone as daft as Captain Sane. Anyway, he knew now the jig was up. There was nothing within his power that could keep Clawdus from a barbecued demise.

Yet other forces still labored on the scene. Four Steptoes swept around the barbecue pit like a single-minded typhoon, each taking Captain Sane by a limb and ferrying him away from Tex before he could even uncup his sauce.

Mesmeron stood beside the boiling kettle, aggravation chiseled into his features. The Steptoes delivered their prisoner to his feet. "I'll take

that, thank you!" he snapped, prying the lobster from Captain Sane's fingers. The Steptoes carted the old man away.

"No more tomfoolery," Mesmeron declared with finality. He stood alone, unreachable by those around him. Thunder rolled in the distance, and a pall of evil settled across the foggy air. The rigging of the phantom ship moaned like a thousand tortured souls. A lone figure stood at the top of the gangplank, masked in inky blackness.

"Allow me to be precipitous," Mesmeron said, his serpent smile elongating his face. He held Clawdus up toward the homecoming witch. "The numinous and ineffable awaits!"

Everyone stared intently at the ship. From atop the gangplank the silhouette of the witch roused to life. "Sing Fie!" she cried, an unnatural sternness in her voice. "Wot sorta trouble yeou stirred up *now*, Mist-ah Crowd-ah!"

A flash of lightning revealed Mrs. Crowder, her travel valise clutched securely in her hands. She surveyed the crowd like a schoolmarm trying to determine which of her students had just giggled. Everyone looked back at her sheep-faced, as if they were indeed guilty of such a misdemeanor.

Mrs. Crowder had a look of perpetual surprise, as if the whole world were scandalous, the result of a bun on the back of her head that was pulled so tight as to raise her eyebrows halfway up her forehead. Right now her expression matched her sentiment.

"I don't recall *rabble-rousin'* as one of yer civic duties as First Selectman, Cyrus Moody," she said, descending the gangplank. "Can we expect Town Meeting to be held pell-mell now, Wilbur Dunmore? How 'bout yeou, Jethro Pratt? Is this th' sorta den of iniquity ye plan fer th' future of Clabberd Island?"

"No, marm," the selectmen said in turn.

Clem couldn't believe his eyes. He knew this was the real Mrs. Crowder, in the flesh, not a projection or some mere figment of his imagination. He could see the ship clearly now, the name *Daisy-A-Day* in gilt letters across her stern molding. He was also aware that she had returned to Clapboard Island two years ahead of schedule.

Clem rushed to the gangplank. "Wot're ye doin hum, Muth-ah? Why ain'tchya in th' South Chiny Sea?"

Mrs. Crowder handed over her valise. "Good Captain McGillicuddy's taken an early retirement," she informed him. "Th' *Daisy-A-Day* can't compete with those merchant marine ships anymore, Mr. Crowd-ah. I guess th' Age o' Sail is truly ov-ah."

"We didn't know it were yeou, Mrs. Crowd-ah," Dunky said, joining them by the gangplank. "We thut it were th' numinous an ineffable!"

"Don't be mindless, Duncan Drinkwat-ah," Mrs. Crowder curtly replied. "But oh, wot a storm we hit comin inta port! Just look wot it did to our canvas! Did yeou say numinous an ineffable?"

Mesmeron stared glassy-eyed at the events transpiring before him. For the first time in his life he was utterly speechless. There was no phantom ship, no Sea Crone, no prophecy or power for the taking. Gone were his ambitions, his lifelong dream of totalitarianism. The blue lobster was a fraud.

Mrs. Crowder caught sight of the crestfallen man. "Well! I shoulda known yeou had a hand in all this, Mesmeron Stoddard!" To her surprise she saw that it was Clawdius he held in his grasp.

"Sing Fie!" she exclaimed. Pulling a measuring stick from her purse, she marched up to Mesmeron and rapped him across the knuckles. He yelped sharply and dropped the lobster to the sand.

"Clapboard Island...the county seat...the state, all have slipped from my grasp," Mesmeron sobbed weakly. With a wail of anguish he reached skyward and squeezed his fingers around a handful of air. "Mass-a-chusetts!"

The selectmen fell on him with a length of rope. Mesmeron offered no resistance as he was bound and gagged. "We'll transport 'im back to Greasy Frog immediately," said Dunmore. "Looks like them Steptoes have a'ready high-tailed it outta here."

Clem watched the selectmen hoist Mesmeron to their shoulders. "Sorry 'bout Massy-chusetts an all that," he said, careful not to mention New Hampshire. For reasons he could not quite place he felt sorry for the would-be oppressor. "Mebbe ye shud staht with Vermont nex' time."

Mesmeron's eyes lit up. Machinations of inestimable complexity flared in his eyes. "Yes! Vermont!" he muffled through the gag as the selectmen carried him away.

Dunky shook his head, still confused by the events of the day. "I guess

ye were right, Clem. That old Sea Crone weren't nawthin but a silly supposition."

"I knowed it all along," Clem said. "Ain't no such things as prophecies an prognostications an whatnot. Why, to think, ever'body runnin aroun, thinkin Clawdus was sum sorta —"

Clem cut himself short. Standing before him was an old sea captain. Not old in years, Clem noted, for they looked to be of a similar age, but old in time. Centuries old, he thought, judging by his dress. Somehow, as impossible as it seemed, he instantly knew who this stranger was. A man whose name had been passed down in chanties and yarns from days of yore.

Captain Josiah Hellenbach.

The ancient rival and vanquisher of the Sea Crone was here, before him, imploring him with his eyes. Clem shook his head, unable to understand the reason. The captain raised his arm and pointed over Clem's shoulder.

Clem turned around. Mordecai Malbon stood at the edge of the kettle, lean and straight as a potato eye reaching for the sun. He held Clawdus at arm's-length, his bony fingers pinched against the fan of his tail.

A sickly smile threatened to smear across his face. He suppressed the impulse and snapped his fingers apart.

Clawdus kerplunked into the boiling kettle.

Through the turmoil of the roiling water, Clem witnessed the blue lobster turn to red.

A cackle rose out of the steam, and a shape, bent and cruel and full of wickedness.

"Nooooo!" shouted Clem. He pushed Mordecai aside and grabbed the searing edge of the kettle. The smell of his own scalding hands filled his nostrils as he heaved with all his might. The kettle toppled, sloshing its boiling contents over the sand.

Clawdus lay sprawled across the beach, motionless and red as the morning sun. Clem dropped to his hands and knees and crawled to his lifeless friend. Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Oh, Clawdus," he said, holding the lobster in his blistered hands.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the eyestalks stirred. Clem stared, wide-eyed as a child. Clawdus arranged his feeding spinnerets in a smile.

"Clawdius, yer alive!" Clem shouted. "By Gorry, yer alive!"

The witch's cackle faded away on the wind and was gone.

"It's ov-ah now, Clawdius," Clem sighed. "Ever'one who meant ye harm is gone. It's jus' yeou an me an...."

Spurs jangled around his head. Clem looked up to see Tex standing over him, the mason jar of barbecue sauce in his white-knuckled fist. "Ah said it b'fore an Ah'll say it again, Son...we're gonna have us a barbecue!" He threw back his head and let out a Lone Star holler. "Yeeeee-Haawww....!"

Tex's voice suddenly jumped up in pitch, changing to an octave unreachable by most grown men. The holler faded into a squeak. Clem looked down, wincing in sympathy as he realized where Clawdius had just snapped his massive claw.

Cross-eyed and silent, Tex Calhoun fell backward into the sand.

"Ye gotta pay attention to th' partic'lars," Clem divulged to his wife. "That's th' hallmahk of th' craft."

Mrs. Crowder watched her husband work his paring iron over the small ivory nugget. "My word, Mr. Crowd-ah, wot on God's green earth is *that* supposed t' be?"

Clem put the finishing touches on his latest scrimshaw masterpiece. "That, Muth-ah, is a spittin likeness of th' world's only livin red lop-stah."

Mrs. Crowder inspected the scrimshaw. "Hm. Looks like a zucchini to me."

Clem leaned over and lowered the ivory lobster into the cold water of the wetsmack. "Wot do ye think o' that, Clawdius?"

The red lobster stared at the scrimshaw piece with unblinkable inkpot eyes.

"I think it's yer best one yet," Dunky replied in the lobster's stead. His stomach rumbled and he reached for a jar on the shelf above the wetsmack. "Mind if I have one o' yer pickled eggs, Clem? Ye only gut two left."

Clem nodded toward the jar. "Those ahn't eggs, Dunky."

Dunky stared into the greenish liquid, his eyes growing wide.

"Doc Proctor brought 'em ov-ah when he were done patchin up Tex," said Clem. "Thut Clawdius might want a keepsake from their scuffle."

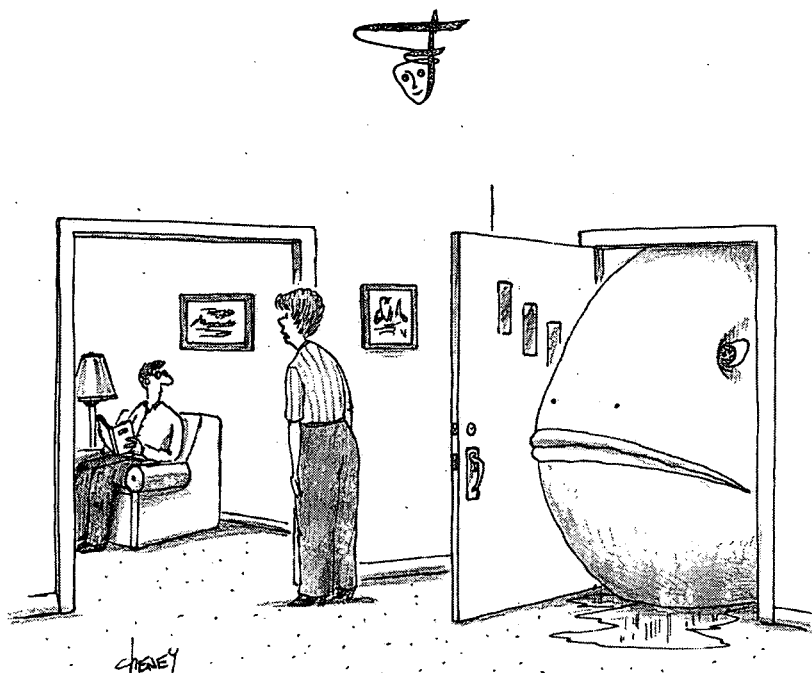
Dunky let out a long whistle. "Gorry. Things *are* bigg-ah in Texas, ain't they, Clem?"

Some things are bigger still, thought Clem, looking down upon the miraculous red lobster. He couldn't settle his mind on whether Clawdus truly was the prophesied Caesar of the Deep, or an omen of the Sea Crone's return, or even if his death would have endowed his executioner with the power of witchcraft. Now that it was over, he wasn't sure what to make of any of it.

His eyes wandered to a pair of unfetched slippers protruding from under the chair.

Clem was certain of one thing, though.

Lobsters make lousy pets.



*"Stewart, did you flush a pet goldfish down the toilet
when you were nine years old?"*

Here's an unsettling tale of a domestic sort from Ms. Emshwiller, who reports that she has several new books due out soon: Mr. Boots, a novel for younger readers, and a story collection that will reprint this tale, as you might deduce from the fact that the collection is entitled I Live with You and You Don't Know It.

I Live with You

By Carol Emshwiller

I LIVE IN YOUR HOUSE AND you don't know it. I nibble at your food. You wonder where it went...where your pencils and pens go.... What happened to your best blouse. (You're just my size. That's why I'm here.) How did your keys get way over on the bedside table instead of by the front door where you always put them? You *do* always put them there. You're careful.

I leave dirty dishes in the sink. I nap in your bed when you're at work and leave it rumpled. You thought you had made it first thing in the morning and you had.

I saw you first when I was hiding out at the book store. By then I was tired of living where there wasn't any food except the muffins in the coffee bar. In some ways it was a good place to be...the reading, the music. I never stole. Where would I have taken what I liked? I didn't even steal back when I lived in a department store. I left there forever in my same old clothes though I'd often worn their things at night. When I left, I could see on their faces that they were glad to see such a raggedy person leave. I could see

they wondered how I'd gotten in in the first place. To tell the truth, only one person noticed me. I'm hardly ever noticed.

But then, at the book store, I saw you: Just my size. Just my look. And you're as invisible as I am. I saw that nobody noticed you just as hardly anybody notices me.

I followed you home — a nice house on the outskirts of town. If I wore your clothes, I could go in and out and everybody would think I was you. But I wondered how to get in in the first place? I thought it would have to be in the middle of the night and I'd have to climb in a window.

But I don't need a window. I hunch down and walk in right behind you. You'd think somebody that nobody ever notices would notice other people, but you don't.

Once I'm in, right away I duck into the hall closet.

You have a cat. Isn't that just like you? And just like me also. I would have had one were I you.

The first few days are wonderful. Your clothes are to my taste. Your cat likes me (right away better than he likes you). Right away I find a nice place in your attic. More a crawl space but I'm used to hunching over. In fact that's how I walk around most of the time. The space is narrow and long, but it has little windows at each end. Out one, I can look right into a tree top. I think an apple tree. If it was the right season I could reach out and pick an apple. I brought up your quilt. I saw you looking puzzled after I took the hall rug. I laughed to myself when you changed the locks on your doors. Right after that I took a photo from the mantel. Your mother, I presume. I wanted you to notice it was gone, but you didn't.

I bring up a footstool. I bring up cushions, one by one until I have four. I bring up magazines, straight from the mail box, before you have a chance to read them.

What I do all day? Anything I want to. I dance and sing and play the radio and TV.

When you're home, I come down in the evening, stand in the hall and watch you watch TV.

I wash my hair with your shampoo. Once, when you came home early, I almost got caught in the shower. I hid in the hall closet, huddled

in with the sheets, and watched you find the wet towel — the spilled shampoo.

You get upset. You think: I've heard odd thumps for weeks. You think you're in danger, though you try hard to talk yourself out of it. You tell yourself it's the cat, but you know it's not.

You get a lock for your bedroom door — a deadbolt. You have to be inside to push it closed.

I have left a book open on the couch, the print of my head on the couch cushion. I've pulled out a few gray hairs to leave there. I have left a half full wine glass on the counter. I have left your underwear (which I wore) on the bathroom floor, dirty socks under the bed, a bra hanging on the towel rack. I left a half-eaten pizza on the kitchen counter. (I ordered out and paid with your stash of quarters, though I know where you keep your secret twenties.)

I set all your clocks back fifteen minutes but I set your alarm clock to four in the morning. I hid your reading glasses. I pull buttons off your sweaters and put them where your quarters used to be. Your quarters I put in your button box.

Normally I try not to bump and thump in the night, but I'm tired of your little life. At the book store and grocery store at least things happened all day long. You keep watching the same TV programs. You go off to work. You make enough money (I see the bank statements), but what do you do with it? I want to change your life into something worth watching.

I begin to thump, bump, and groan and moan. (I've been feeling like groaning and moaning for a long time, anyway.) Maybe I'll bring you a man.

I'll buy you new clothes and take away the old ones, so you'll *have* to wear the new ones. The new clothes will be red and orange and with stripes and polka dots. When I get through with you, you'll be real...or at least realer. People will notice you.

Now you groan and sigh as much as I do. You think: This can't be happening. You think: What about the funny sounds coming from the crawl space? You think: I don't dare go up there by myself, but who could I get to go with me? (You don't have any friends that I know of. You're like me in that.)

Monday you go off to work wearing a fuzzy blue top and red leather pants. You had a hard time finding a combination without stripes or big flowers or dots on it.

I watch you from your kitchen window. I'm heating up your leftover coffee. I'm making toast. (I use up all the butter. You thought there was plenty for the next few days.)

You almost caught me the time I came home late with packages. I had to hide behind the curtains. I could tell that my feet showed out the bottom, but you didn't notice.

Another time you saw me duck into the hall closet but you didn't dare open the door. You hurried upstairs to your bedroom and pushed the deadbolt. That evening you didn't come down at all. You skipped supper. I watched TV...any show I wanted.

I put another deadbolt on the *outside* of your bedroom door. Just in case. It's way up high. I don't think you'll notice. It might come in handy.

(Lacy underwear with holes in lewd places. Nudist magazines. Snails and sardines — smoked oysters. Neither one of us like them. All the things I get with your money are for *you*. I don't steal.)

How do you get through Christmas all by yourself? You're lonely enough for both of us. You wrap empty boxes in Christmas paper just to be festive. You buy a tree, a small one. It's artificial and comes with lights that glimmer on and off. The cat and I come down to sleep near its glow.

But the man. The one I want to bring to you. I look over the personals. I write letters to possibilities but, as I'm taking them to the post office, I see somebody. He limps and wobbles. (The way he lurches sideways looks like sciatica to me. Or maybe arthritis.) He needs a haircut and a shave. He's wearing an old plaid jacket and he's all knees and elbows. There's a countrified look about him. Nobody wears plaid around here.

I limp behind him. Watch him go into one of those little apartments behind a main house and over a garage. It's not far from our house.

It can't be more than one room. I could never creep around in that place and not be noticed.

A country cousin. Country uncle more likely, he's older than we are. Is he capable of what I want him for?

Next day I watch him in the grocery store. Like us, he buys living-alone kind of food, two apples, a tomato, crackers, oatmeal. Poor people's kind of food. I get in line with him at the check-out. I bump into him on purpose as he pays and peek into his wallet. That's all he has — just enough for what he buys. He counts out the change a penny at a time and he hardly has a nickel left over. I get ready to give him a bit extra if he needs it.

He's such an ugly, rickety man.... Perfect.

There's no reason to go into his over-the-garage room, but I want to. This is important. I need to see who he is.

I use our credit card to open his lock.

What a mess. He needs somebody like us to look after him. His bed is piled with blankets. The room isn't very well heated. The bathroom has a curtain instead of a door. There's no tub or even shower. I check the hot water in the sink. It says HOT, but both sides come out cold. All he has is a hot plate. No refrigerator. There's two windows, but no curtains. Isn't that just like a man. I could climb up on the back fence and see right in.

There's nothing of the holidays here. Nothing of any holidays and not a single picture of a relative. And, like our house, nothing of friends. You and he are made for each other.

What to do to show I've been here? But this time I don't feel much like playing tricks. And it's so messy he wouldn't notice, anyway.

It's cold. I haven't taken my coat off all through this. I make myself a cup of tea. (There's no lemons and no milk. Of course.) I sit in his one chair. It's painted ugly green. All his furniture is as if picked up on the curb and his bedside table is one of those fruit boxes. As I sit and sip, I check his magazines. They look as though stolen from somebody's garbage. I'm shivering. (No wonder he's out. I suppose it's not easy to shave. He'd have to heat the water on the hot plate.)

He needs a cat. Something to sleep on his chest to keep him warm like your cat does with me.

I have our groceries in my backpack. I leave two oranges and a doughnut in plain sight beside the hot plate. I leave several of our quarters.

I leave a note: I put in our address. I sign your name. I write: Come for Christmas. Two o'clock. I'll be wearing red leather pants! Your neighbor, Nora.

(I wonder which of us should wear those pants.)

I clean up a little bit but not so much that he'd notice if he's not a noticing person. Besides, people only notice when things are dirty. They never notice when things are cleaned up.

As I walk home, I see you on your way out. We pass each other. You look right at me. I'm wearing your green sweater and your black slacks. We look at each other, my brown eyes to your brown eyes. Only difference is, your hair is pushed back and mine hangs down over my forehead. You go right on by. I turn and look back. You don't. I laugh behind my hand that you had to wear those red leather pants and a black and white striped top.

He's too timid and too self-deprecating to come. He doesn't like to limp in front of people and he's ashamed not to have enough money hardly even for his food, and not to have a chance to shave and take a bath. Though if he's scared by me coming into his room, he might come. He might want to see who Nora is and if the address is real. His pretext will be that he wants to thank you for the food and quarters. He might even want to give them back. He might be one of those rich people who live as if they were poor. I should have looked for money or bank books. I will next time.

When the doorbell rings, who else could it be?

You open the door.

"Are you Nora?"

"Yes?"

"I want to thank you."

I knew it. I suppose he wants more money.

"But I want to bring your quarters back. That was kind of you but I don't need them."

You don't know what to say. You suspect it's all because of me. That I've, yet again, made your life difficult. You wonder what to do. He doesn't look dangerous but you never can tell. You want to get even with me some

way. You suppose, if he is dangerous, it would be bad for both of us so it must be all right. You ask him in.

He hobbles into your living room. You say sit down, that you'll get tea. You're stalling for time.

He still holds the handful of quarters. He puts them on the coffee table.

You don't know how those quarters got to him or even if they really are your quarters. "No, no," you say, and "Where did these come from?"

"They were in my room with a note from you and this address. You said, Come for Christmas."

You wonder what I'll like least. Do I want you to invite him to stay for supper? Unlikely, though, since you only have one TV dinner and you know I know that.

"Somebody is playing a joke on me. But the tea...."

You need help getting started so I trip you in the hall as you come back into the room. Everything goes down. Too bad, too, because you'd used your good china in spite of how this man looks.

Of course he pushes himself up and hobbles to you and helps pick up the things and you. You say you could make more but he says, It doesn't matter. Then you both go out to the kitchen. I go, too. Sidling. Slithering. The cat slides in with us. Both your and his glasses are thick. I'm counting on your blindness. I squat down. He puts the broken cups on a corner of the counter. You get out two more. He says, these are too nice. You say, they're Mother's. He says, "You shouldn't use the Rosenthal, not for me."

There now, are you both rich yet never use your money?

The cat jumps on the table and you swipe him off. No wonder he likes me better than you. I always let him go where he wants and I like him on the table.

You're looking at our man — studying his crooked nose. You see what neither of us has noticed until now. The hand that reaches to help you wears a ring with a large stone. Some sort of school ring. You're thinking: Well, well, and changing your mind. As am I.

He's too good for you. Maybe might be good enough for me.

We are all, all three, the same kind of person. When you leave in the morning, I've seen you look out the door to make sure there's nobody out there you might have to say hello to.

But now you talk. You think. You ask. You wonder out loud if this and that. You look down at your striped shirt and wish you were wearing your usual clothes. I'm under the table wearing your brown blouse with the faint pattern of fall leaves. I look like a wrinkled up paper bag kicked under here and forgotten. The cat is down here with me purring.

It never takes long for two lonely people living in their fantasies to connect — to see all sorts of things in each other that don't exist.

You've waited for each other all your lives. You almost say so. Besides, he'd have a nice place to live if...if anything comes of this.

I think about that black lacy underwear. That pink silk nightie. As soon as I have a chance, I'll go get them. I might need them for myself.

But how to get you moving? You're both all talk. Or you are, he's not talking much. Perhaps one look at the nightie might get things rolling. That'll have to be for later. Or on the other hand....

I reach back to the shelf behind me and, when neither he nor you are looking, I bring out the sherry. They'll both think the other one got the bottle out.

(They do.)

You get wineglasses. You even get out your TV dinner and say you'll split it. It's turkey with stuffing. You got it special for Christmas.

Of course he says for you to eat it all, but you say you never do, anyway, so you split it.

I'm getting hungry myself. If it was just you, I would sneak a few bites, but there's little enough for the two of you. I'll have to find another way.

You both get tipsy. It doesn't take much. You hardly ever drink and it looks like he doesn't either. And I think you want to get drunk. You want something to happen as much as I do.

Every now and then I take a sip of your drinks. And on an empty stomach it takes even less. With the drone of your talk, talk, talking, I almost go to sleep.

But you're heading upstairs already.

I crawl out from under the table and climb the stairs behind you. I'm as wobbly as you are. Actually I'm wobblier. We, all three, go into your bedroom. And the cat. You push the deadbolt. He wonders why. "Aren't you alone here?"

You say, "Not exactly." And then, "I'll tell you later."

(You're right, this certainly isn't the time for a discussion about me.)

First thing I grab our sexy nightie from the drawer. I get under the bed and put it on. That's not easy, cramped up under there. For a few minutes I lose track of what's happening above me. I comb my hair as you always have it, back away from your face. I have to use my fingers and I don't have a mirror so I'm not sure how it comes out. I pinch my cheeks and bite my lips to make them redder.

The cat purrs.

I lean up to see what's going on.

Nothing much so far. Even though tipsy, he seems shy. Inexperienced. I don't think he's ever been anybody's grandfather.

(We're, all of us, all of a piece. None of us has ever been anybody's relative.)

You look pretty much passed out. Or you're pretending. Either way, it's a good time for me to make an appearance.

I crawl out from under the bed and check myself in the mirror behind them. My hair is a mess but I look good in the silky nightgown. Better than you do in your stripes and red pants. By far.

I do a little sexy dance. I say, "She's not Nora, I'm Nora. I'm the one wrote you that note."

You sit up. You were faking being drunk. You think: Now I see who you are. Now I'll get you. But you won't.

I stroke the cat. Suggestively. He purrs. (The cat, I mean.) I purr. Suggestively.

I see his eyes light up. (The man's, I mean.) Now there'll be some action.

I say, "I don't even know your name."

He says, "Willard."

I'm on his good side because I asked, and you're not because you didn't. All this talk, talk, talk, talk and you didn't.

You slither away, down under the bed. You feel ashamed of yourself and yet curious. You wonder: How did you ever get yourself in this position, and what to do now? But I do know what to do. I give you a kick and hand you the cat.

Willard. Willard is a little confused. But eager. More than before. He likes the nightgown and says so.

I take a good long look at him. Those bushy eyebrows. Lots of white hairs in them. I help him take off his shirt. His is not my favorite kind of chest. He does have a nice flat stomach though. (I liked that about him from the start — back when I first saw him wobbling down the street.) I look into his green/gray/tan eyes.

But what about, I love you?

I say it. "What about I love you?"

That stops him. I didn't mean to do that. I wanted to give Nora a good show. Of course it's much too soon for any sort of thing that might resemble love.

"I take that back," I say.

But it's too late. He's putting on his shirt. (It's a dressy white one. He's even wearing cufflinks engraved with WT.)

Is it really over already?

I pick up the cat, hurry out, slam the door, and push the deadbolt on the outside, then turn back and look through the keyhole. I can see almost the whole bed.

Now look, his hands are...all of a sudden...on her and on all the right places. He knows. Maybe he actually *is* somebody's grandfather after all. And you...you are feeling things that make your back arch.

He tells you he loves you. Now he says it. He can't tell us apart. He'll love anything that comes his way.

I have what I thought I wanted...a good view of something interesting for a change, except....

Actually I can't see much, just his back and then your back and then his back and then yours. (How do they do that, still attached?)

Until we're all, all of us, exhausted.

I go downstairs.... (I like how this nightgown feels. I'm so slinky and slippery. I bump and grind just for myself.)

I make myself a peanut butter sandwich. I feel better after eating. Things are fine.

I might leave you milk and cookies. Bring it now while you sleep so I can lock you both in again. But I don't suppose that lock will hold against two people who *really* want to get out.

I think about maybe both of you up in my crawl space. He's taller than

we are. He'd not like it. I think about your job at the ice cream factory unfolding boxes to put the ice cream in. I wouldn't mind that kind of job. You sit and daydream. I saw you. You hardly talk to anybody.

I think about how you can't prove you're you. You'll go to the police. You'll say you're you, but they'll laugh. Your clothes are all wrong for the you you used to be. They'll say, the person who's lived here all this time dresses in mouse colors. You've lived a claustrophobic life. If you'd had any friends it would be different. Besides, I can do as well as you do, unfolding boxes. I've done the same when I had jobs before I quit for this easier life. I won't be cruel. I'd never be cruel. I'll let you live in the crawl space as long as you want.

Your daydream is Willard. Or most of him, though not all. For sure his eyes. For sure his elegant slim hands and the big gold ring. You'll ask if it's a school ring.

Or one of us will.

Then I hear banging. And not long after that, the crash. They break open the door. It splinters where the deadbolt is. If I'd put it in the middle of the door instead of at the top, it might have held better.

By the time the door goes down I'm right outside it, watching. They run downstairs without seeing me.

I go and look out the window. He's leaving — hurries down the street with only one arm in his coat sleeve and it's the wrong sleeve. Other hand holds up his pants. What did you do to send him off so upset?

I open the window and call out, "Willard!" But he doesn't hear or doesn't want to. Is he trying to get away? From you or me?

What did you do to scare him so? Everything was fine when I came down to eat. But maybe getting locked in scared him. Or maybe you told him to go and never come back and you threw his coat at him as he left. Or he thinks you're me and is in love with me even though he told you he loved you. Or, like most men, he's unwilling to commit to anybody.

But here you go, out the door right behind him. You have your coat on properly and your clothes all straightened up. Now you're the one calling, "Willard."

You'd not have done that before. You've changed. You'll take back your life. Everybody will make way for you now. You'll have an evil look. You'll frown. People will step off the sidewalk to let you go by.

I want for us to live as we did but you'll set traps. I'll trip on trip wires. Fall down the stairs in the middle of the night. There won't be any more quarters lying around. You'll put a deadbolt on the crawl space door. Or better yet, you'll barricade it shut with a dresser. Nobody will even know there's a door there.

I made you what you are today, grand and real, but you'll lock me up up here with nothing but your mousey clothes. Your old trunks. Your dust and dark.

I dress in the wornout clothes I wore when I came. I pack the nightgown, the black underwear. I grab a handful of quarters. I don't touch your secret stash of twenties. I pet the cat. I leave your credit cards and keys on the hall table. I don't steal.



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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE GOES HOLLYWOOD

ONCE UPON a time, when my beard was barely sketched upon my chin, I was wont to sit long hours in campus taverns, waxing passionate over things I did not quite understand. Matters literary and philosophical, mostly. Conversations fueled by pitchers of beer and the various other stimulants with which nineteen-year-old would-be intellectuals are prone to defile the temples of their bodies. All that has changed is now I do my sitting in working class and hotel bars — my lack of understanding is no less complete than it was, although perhaps I express it more clearly, and my assertions are leavened with a seasoning of doubt or speculation. I recall being so assertive back in the day that I undertook to write a work of philosophy entitled *True Lies*, which dealt with — among other

things — the dualism implicit to language and, I was to discover later, consisted chiefly of inept restatements of the theories of early Ludwig Wittgenstein and Benedetto Croce. I look back on those times with a degree of nostalgia because of the certainty I felt, because of the arrogance that allowed me to make the assumption that I could wrap my mind around the universe and squeeze forth some crucial and hitherto unexcavated truth. I also look back on that assumption with a profound measure of embarrassment, a feeling apparently not shared by David O. Russell (*Three Kings*, *Flirting with Disaster*), whose new film, *I Heart Huckabees*, seems something of a reprisal of such sophomoric deliberations.

The comedy of ideas (a cousin of the literature of ideas, science fiction, although the two don't spend enough time together) does

not have much of a tradition in American cinema, which partly explains why a picture as unsteadily mounted as *Huckabees* has received so much critical attention. Recently, only *Waking Life*, Richard Linklater's rotoscoped animation feature, has dealt (more successfully, I might add) with the fundamental materials of Russell's film, i.e., the constituency of reality. Philip K. Dick's novels are rife with similar ideas and comic possibility, but unfortunately the movies made from them have concentrated on their action elements and neglected their essential stuff. In films like *Love and Death*, *Annie Hall*, *Play It Again, Sam*, and others, Woody Allen, the uncrowned king of this subgenre, succeeded in making pictures that treated philosophy with a sly amiability and, more significantly, were often wildly humorous. *Huckabees* seems to essay a post-modern take on a Woody Allen film, but whereas Allen's films are often amusing, Russell's picture flounders amid its own clunky metaphors and unrelenting cleverness — although it provides a few good moments, basically it's as deadly boring as a seven-course meal of oatmeal recipes. To tell the truth, a movie concerning how this film got greenlighted in the first place,

one detailing the various meetings, studio heads mulling over the concept of an existential comedy ("Um...It's still a comedy, right?"), pretending to understand what they're talking about, relying on the fact that Russell, who has not made a film in four years, is a bankable director...that might have been considerably more funny.

The plot, such as it is, concerns a twenty-something activist, Albert Markovski (Jason Schwarzman, *Rushmore*), who is the founder and leader of Open Spaces, a group that opposes suburban sprawl and, in the specific, is committed to saving a particular marsh. He's made a deal with devil, Brad Stand (Jude Law), a corporate executive with *Huckabees*, a Target-like chain of stores, who professes to share Albert's enthusiasms but has co-opted the movement to his own nefarious purposes, arranging a benefit featuring Shania Twain to save the marsh, a plan that strikes the membership of Open Spaces as a more promising campaign than does mailings of Albert's tree-hugger poetry. At the same time, Albert is undergoing a personal crisis, or thinks he is — he keeps running into the same young seven-foot Sudanese refugee, Mr. Nimieri, and he has become convinced that these

coincidences reflect the onset of some material dilemma and bear upon the nature of reality. To alleviate this crisis, he goes to see Bernard and Vivian (a Beatle-mopped Dustin Hoffman and a matronly Lily Tomlin), "existential detectives" whose method of investigation demands total access to their clients' lives, allowing the pair to spy on them night and day; it also involves them placing the client in a sensory deprivation bag, a process during which the clients see their problems perched in the branches of a tree. The detectives further appear to be gifted with magical powers that enable them to break reality down into its component parts for purposes of examination, an effect that Russell achieves through a variety of camera tricks.

Bernard-and-Vivian's essential theory is that everything is connected — in fact, they seem to be stating that everything is everything else, a oneness. Bernard demonstrates this circumstance by moving his hand underneath a blanket, making shapes, and saying, "This is you, this is a cheeseburger, etc...." We are, he claims, all under the blanket. As they begin to investigate Albert's case, their theory takes control of the movie, drawing in almost the entire cast. Brad becomes

a convert, as does his girlfriend, Dawn Campbell (Naomi Watts), the Huckabees' perkyspokesmodel, and Albert is introduced to his "other," kind of an analog to an AA sponsor, Tommy Corn (Mark Wahlberg), a fireman so obsessed with the evils of petroleum products, he rides his bicycle to fires. Eventually, after Albert and Tommy visit Mr. Nimieri in the home of his adoptive parents (one of the movie's funnier scenes), your basic clichéd Christian right-wing couple, Bernard makes the case that the serendipity between Albert and Mr. Nimieri is due to the fact that one was orphaned by politics, the other by indifference (Albert's parents are equally clichéd materialists, who are shown to care more about their malfunctioning stereo than their son's existential dilemma).

With this question firmly resolved, the film's focus shifts to the contest between Brad and Albert, essentially stand-ins for the opposing views of spirituality and materialism. To a lesser extent, it shifts as well to the conflict between Catherine Vaupan (Isabelle Huppert) and Bernard and Vivian. Catherine, a former pupil of the detectives, has evolved into a pop-philosopher who has come to hold that the universe is random, cruel,

and meaningless, this in direct opposition to Bernard-and-Vivian's warm-and-fuzzy view of interconnectedness; she wanders onto the scene and for no reason that is made clear (though an ideological rivalry is implied), takes an interest in Albert's case. From this point on, the movie disintegrates or, more to the point, loses its interconnectedness and lapses into whackiness — in fact, Russell appears to be relying entirely on whackiness to provide pacing. Dawn becomes a disciple of Bernard-and-Vivian's, takes to wearing overalls and an Amish bonnet, and subsequently loses her job to a peppy redhead. In a fit of existential enlightenment, Catherine and Albert smear each other with marsh mud and become lovers. Tommy discovers that he can achieve a form of *satori* by smacking himself in the face with a balloon, a knowledge that he passes on to Albert. Brad loses his ability to tell his favorite anecdote, a story about Shania Twain and chicken salad sandwiches, and is thoroughly disgraced in the boardroom. Tommy, responding to an alarm on his bicycle, beats the other firemen to the fire, finds Dawn half-succumbed to smoke inhalation, and they initiate a relationship that causes both to be hospitalized. The

film's best moments belong to Watts and Law as they struggle to reconcile their materialistic lifestyle with the New Agey hoo-ha into which they have newly bought. Though there is a vague progression to these events, a sort of ping-ponging structure between the poles of "all is one" and "all is chaos," the looseness of Russell's direction causes it to seem indulgent — it's as if he's trying to stretch his material, as if he's run out of ideas, always a bad thing when you're attempting to film a comedy of ideas.

The case can perhaps be made that Russell's intent with *Huckabees* is purely satire, that it was his sole intent to poke fun at pseudo-intellectuals by belittling their notions of profundity. The materials of the film are, indeed, satirical; the characters scarcely more than caricatures who represent crudely stated polarities; but the fact that Russell labels his film "an existential comedy," and that he has infused the movie with a distinct tone of affection for its ideas, undermine this notion and causes one to think that he is using satire to point up, gently, the confusion of the human condition and not for some more strident and abrasive purpose. Also it is worth noting that the publicity

materials accompanying the film stress that Russell has for lo these many years "grappled" with such philosophical questions, and offers the dubious credential that he once studied eastern philosophy at the knee of Bob Thurman, Uma's daddy (I suppose that Bob is the one responsible for Uma's innate grasp of Hegelian dialectics, which in turn led her to marry that mental giant, Ethan Hawke, in hopes that their issue would prove to be a philosopher king). If true, and if *Huckabees* is the distillation of that grappling, it does not speak well of Russell's intelligence — Russell is forty-something and his abstruse speculations have a decidedly adolescent cast, exactly what one would expect from a movie directed by someone who is considered by Hollywood standards to be an intellectual rebel. Even if untrue, he does not do sufficient justice to the ideas embodied by his characters to make of his satire other than a club wielded against an unworthy Target.

Films such as *Ghost World* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* treated of the search for the meaning of life, but they had a lighter comedic touch that ultimately proved more affecting (indeed, a dash of Charlie Kaufman's skewed humanism would not have

been unwelcome in *Huckabees*). Woody Allen, as mentioned, once did this kind of thing much better, able to deride yet at the same time humanize his New York intellectuals.

The cast strives bravely to make something out of nothingness. Wahlberg serves up just the right mix of earnestness and obsession, and interacts well with Schwarzman, who is coming to resemble a young Tom Cruise disguised in Groucho Marx eyebrows. Watts, who was robbed of an Oscar for her performance in *21 Grams*, proves as adept at comedy as she is at drama. Law projects a smarmy handsomeness, which augurs well for his upcoming performance in the remake of *Alfie*. Hoffman and Tomlin are appropriately silly, and Huppert's turn parodying a latter-day Simone de Beauvoir lends the movie a touch of class it otherwise lacks. But good comedic performances cannot compensate for a script that becomes, as the movie drags on, increasingly unfunny. Imagine being trapped in a conference room filled with scriptwriters who have been charged with the task of rendering the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, which they do not fully comprehend, into one-liners. That should give you some idea of the

tediousness of the film. The characters are not infused with enough humanity to sustain them against the redundancies of the script, and the main problem with *I Heart Huckabeees* is that it has no heart.



Robot Origami

By Robert Frazier

excavators of that self lost
spelunkers of the soul's bandwidth
the folded fold themselves once again
seeking some Holy Absolute

their thought balloons of large primes
bloom up like great dish antennae
their data caves of possibility
backdoor into red directives

why cling to romantic artifice
why hold to the physical law

I happen upon their lost scintilla
their brilliant schematic
and bury these as if they were
mere detritus of ourselves 卐

This new story from the author of "Dr. Borg" and "The Lightning Bug Wars" is lighthearted, but consider: if intelligent aliens someday contact humanity, how will most of us get to know these extraterrestrials? In person, via a news conference, or perhaps...?

Late Show

By Gary W. Shockley

Ed Sullivan Theater, NYC

DL: Okay, before introducing our final guest, we have today's top ten list.

[PAUL SHAFFER'S MUSICAL INTRO]

DL: Here we go. Today's category is the top ten ways we humans are making the alien feel welcome.

Number ten: Arranged a threesome with the Bentley twins.

Number nine: Queer Eye makeover.

Number eight: Invited him to private showing of all five *Alien* movies.

[PAUSING, EYEBROWS RISING AND FALLING] The aliens have landed.

PS: Alien.

DL: What's that, Paul?

PS: There's just one. The alien has landed.

DL: The alien has landed. [LOOKING AT NOTES, REFINDING SPOT]

Number seven: Gave him a pet Chihuahua that's really a rat.

Number six: Home movies of that weird Letterman kid. [WIDE GRIN]

Number five: Upgraded his antennae for DIRECTV.

Number four: Offered him a janitorial job on the International Space Station.

Number three: [BARING TEETH, ENUNCIATING] Welcome Wagon.

Number two: A year's supply of Turtle Wax for his flying saucer. And the number one way we're making the alien feel welcome: Gave him a Segway so he can really get around.

[PAUL SHAFFER'S MUSICAL CLOSE]

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Jileep-leep.

J: [WALKING OUT, SITTING DOWN] Hi, Dave.

DL: You know, I believe you're the first alien we've had on the show. So this is a big moment. How are you doing? How are you enjoying Earth?

J: Humans are treating me very well, Dave. [HOLDING UP A PIECE OF PAPER] By the way, I have a list, too. The top three most annoying human habits.

DL: Only three? [GRINNING] It seems that list could be a lot longer. Well, all right. Let's have it. Paul, give us something.

PS: [PAUL ON KEYBOARD, SINGING] The alien has landed, his name's Jileep-leep; he's got a list of three, from Alpha Centauri.

J: Okay, the most annoying human habits.

Number three: Spooning.

Number two: That whole four-way-stop thing.

Number one: Obsession with silly games like "Will It Float?"

[PAUL ON KEYBOARD, WRAPPING UP]

DL: Oh, don't get me started. "Will It Float?"'s the best segment we have. Isn't that right, Paul?

PS: [GRINNING] I love "Will It Float?"

DL: [LOOKING AT NOTES, SIPPING MUG] So, Jileep-leep, let's see if I've got this right. You landed your saucer on the White House lawn. And, well, I guess that's something of a tradition, isn't it. I mean, if you're an alien coming to Earth and you want to deal with Earthlings, you land on the White House lawn.

J: [ABOVE AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] That's right, Dave.

- DL: But you ran into a bit of a problem, right? One of those bureaucratic snafus. The White House right away got suspicious because your saucer was made of balsa wood.
- J: [ABOVE AUDIENCE CHUCKLES] That's correct, Dave.
- DL: After that, you spent six weeks in jail. For trespassing or some sort of trumped-up charge, am I right?
- J: For psychiatric evaluation.
- DL: And what did they conclude?
- J: That I'm harmless.
- DL: Well, thank goodness for that! You know, from all the movies we see, when aliens come to Earth [STRIKES FIST INTO PALM], Bam! [REPEATS GESTURE] I mean, bam! It's like, things just go to hell. An alien lands on the White House lawn, and right away we expect the worst. But I guess that's just in the movies and, and, well — We're kinda prejudiced, aren't we.
[AUDIENCE CHUCKLES]
- J: Fear of the unknown is a universal phenomenon.
- DL: That's — That's exactly what I mean. A universal phenomenon.
[SIPS FROM MUG] So, did you get to talk to the President?
- J: [LAUGHTER EVEN AS HE SHAKES HEAD] No, Dave.
- DL: Well, that hardly seems right. I mean, you come all this way, from some far galaxy, across how many light-years, and the President won't talk to you?
- J: He's a very busy man, Dave.
- DL: How about one of his underlings? Did you talk to the Secretary of State? The Secretary of Foreign Affairs? The Secretary of Alien Visitors?
- J: No, Dave. They were all pretty busy in Washington.
- DL: Well [SMILING BROADLY], that's why you're here. Because we're never busy. Are we, Paul.
- PS: We're alien-friendly.
- DL: What's that, Paul?
- PS: We're alien-friendly, Dave.
- DL: Alien-friendly, yes. Now, Jileep-leep. I gotta be honest with you. And maybe it's just me. But if I were to run into you on the street, I'd think you were human. Do you get that problem a lot?

J: Only here on Earth.

DL: [ABOVE AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] Well, I guess that's true. I suppose this is the place you'd run into it most. But tell me, Jileep-leep. Did you come to Eárrth to deliver some sort of message?

J: [ABRUPTLY STANDS] I would like to take this opportunity to declare my candidacy for President of the United States.

DL: [AUDIENCE ROARS, DAVE WIPES TEAR FROM EYE, CLEARLY CAUGHT OFF GUARD]

J: [SITTING BACK DOWN] I was only kidding.

DL: I kinda suspected you were. But let's be serious for a moment — because this is a very serious matter. Did you come to Earth to give us humans some sort of important advice?

J: I hadn't planned to. But I could, if you want.

DL: [AMUSED, LOOKING ABOUT AS AUDIENCE LAUGHS] What do you think, Paul? Should we ask the alien for some advice?

PS: [GRINNING] It — It seems a shame he'd come all this way and not share his wisdom with us.

DL: Well, there you have it. Yes, humanity would like some advice. Now, before you get started, what do you think of Dr. Phil? Is he for real?

J: That's a TV show, Dave. It's entertainment.

DL: [LAUGHTER, CHECKMARKING A SHEET] Well, we can take Dr. Phil off our appearance calendar. But getting back to humanity, what's the number one piece of advice you have for us? No, skip that. That's probably too freaky, too much for us to handle. How about the one-thousandth most important piece of advice for us humans? What would that be?

J: The seven-ten split isn't as hard as it looks.

DL: [AUDIENCE ROARS. DAVID GENUINELY AMUSED. LOOKS ASIDE AT BAND WHILE POINTING AT JILEEP-LEEP] A real live alien. [SIPS FROM MUG] So, Mr. Jileep-leep. How long are you planning to stay on Earth? When will you be leaving?

J: I'll take off the moment you cut to a commercial break.

DL: You mean, head home? You make it sound like being on my show was the whole point of your coming to Earth.

- J: That's about it, Dave.
- DL: [IN AN ASIDE TO THE LAUGHING AUDIENCE] Two months here and already a master at sucking up to the host. [TURNING BACK TO ALIEN] Well, I'm flattered. But wait a minute. Didn't they confiscate your balsa-wood saucer? They did, didn't they. So how are you going to get home? Can you just sprout wings and fly?
- J: Of course not, Dave. That's just plain silly. As for the saucer, it was only for show. I don't need it. You see, I'm really just a projection.
- DL: A projection?
- J: I'm not really here, physically.
- DL: [PATTING HIM ON SHOULDER] Now, wait a minute. Wait just a doggone minute. [CHUCKLING] How gullible do you think we are?
- J: [FATUOUS GRIN]
- DL: Well, while you're here, maybe you could help us out a bit. Because we've been puzzling over something for quite a while. Just where the heck is Bin Laden?
- J: [OVER AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] Thirty-two degrees thirty-five minutes eight-point-one-two seconds north, sixty-eight degrees fifty-three minutes seven-point-seven-three seconds east.
- DL: [WHEN AUDIENCE LAUGHTER SUBSIDES, TURNS TO ALAN KALTAR] Alan? Alan, do we have a hot line to the White House?
- A: [CAUGHT OFF GUARD, ANSWERING SLOWLY] No, Dave. We haven't got that hooked up yet.
- DL: [LAUGHING] We haven't got that hooked up yet. [LOOKING OVER AT ALAN] Next week?
- A: [DEADPAN LOOK] Next week we'll have the hot line to the White House hooked up.
- DL: [STILL LAUGHING] So, jileep-leep, you're a world traveler — a universe traveler. You know pretty much everything, don't you?
- J: Not really.
- DL: But you know a lot of stuff about Earth, about us. You've been studying us from afar, figuring us all out, so you'd come prepared.
- J: We know quite a bit about Earth and humans.

- DL: What kind of things? Could you tell something very personal about one of us? Like, when we're going to die? What about Paul over there?
- PS: I don't wanna know.
- DL: Come on, Paul. It's —
- PS: Even as a joke, I don't wanna know.
- DL: [RELENTING] Well, okay, how about humanity itself? You know, that big catastrophe when the sun throws a tantrum —
- J: Two Thousand and Nine.
- DL: What! [LOOKING ABOUT, SHOCKED] What! I thought it was way off, millions of years —
- J: Your sun will nova in just over three billion years. The solar event in Two Thousand and Nine will be much milder, but still sufficient to wipe out the human species.
- DL: Gee. [GRIMACING] I'm sorry I asked. Gee! [GRIMACING AGAIN. REACHES UNDER DESK, SETS PHONE ATOP DESK, CALLS UPSTAIRS] Stephanie?
- SB: Hi, Dave.
- DL: Stephanie, do you have a question for the alien?
- SB: No.
- DL: No?
- SB: No, Dave.
- DL: You're sure? Because he's come across who knows how many light-years just to be with us and — You must have some question for him.
- SB: No. [PAUSE] But I do have a funny story.
- DL: [LOOKING SUSPICIOUS] It's not that same one, is it? You know, the one about being out in the barn and climbing a ladder —
- SB: No, Dave.
- DL: Okay.
- SB: You see, I was out in the barn —
- DL: [HANGS UP, GRINS AT CAMERA AS AUDIENCE LAUGHS. SHRUGS] We just don't have time tonight. In fact, we're almost out of time now. [TURNS TO ALIEN AND PATS HIM ON SHOULDER] Well, Jileep-leep. I think we're coming up on that

fateful commercial break. But I do want to thank you for taking time out from your travels to pay us this visit. And, and on behalf of all of humanity I want to apologize for the lousy way Washington treated you. [TO THE CAMERA] We'll — or I'll — be right back.

On Planet Joop, inside Diaspora Institute headquarters:

As the teleprojection booth shimmered with the capsule's return, the Joopian Supreme Council members clustered about it. Presider Prenoop-noop and Significators Klajaat-jaat and Sramiid-miid steadied Jileep-leep as he emerged.

"Are you satisfied now, Jileep-leep?" scolded Sramiid-miid.

"Imagine the expense if we all did this sort of thing," added Klajaat-jaat.

Subdued, Jileep-leep at last spoke. "I just wanted to make sure."

"It's always tough, your first insemination," said Presider Prenoop-noop, placing a delicate hand on Jileep-leep's shoulder. "But you have to let go. He's going to be a fine father to your son."



COMING ATTRACTIONS

APRIL, come she will/When streams are ripe and swelled with rain. We hope your next issue won't arrive waterlogged, but we do expect to shower you with lots of great fiction.

In "The Harrowing," M. Rickert spins a tale-within-a-tale concerning a seminary and several boys whose education is not entirely of this world.

We've also got a new story next month from the warped mind of Paul Di Filippo. "The Secret Sutras of Sally Strumpet" shares with us some secrets of the publishing world, where all is not as it seems.

Other stories due soon include Ron Goulart's latest Harry Challenge adventure, a new Kedrigern story from John Morressy, and surprises aplenty. Surf over to www.fsfmag.com and treat yourself to a subscription so you won't miss any of the fun.

You might recall meeting Maggot in "A Democracy of Trolls" back in our Oct/Nov. 2002 issue. He's the human boy who was raised by a band of trolls. His full story will be recounted in a novel entitled The Prodigal Troll, which is due out in June from the new publishing imprint called Pyr. "Love and the Wayward Troll," which is excerpted from the novel, begs the question: if you take the boy out of the troll clan, can you take the troll out of the boy?

Love and the Wayward Troll

By Charles Coleman Finlay

SLASHES OF BRIGHT COLOR, a ragged line of them, stomping and shouting, penetrated the forest's net of browns and greens.

Maggot shifted his position in the tree for a better view. Pine needles pricked his bare back. The bough swayed slightly under his callused feet. Blue and yellow and white, closer, closer still, and then, leaning forward, Maggot —

Just another man.

Yes, the flat chest and beard were those of a man. Maggot flared his nostrils, frowned, rocked back on his haunches.

Maggot had been raised by a troll, by Windy, who'd found him as a baby in the arms of his dead mother down in these valleys. Ragweed, her mate, had wanted to kill the baby. "It's nothing but a maggot," he'd said. "It's little, white, and it wouldn't make a mouthful, and you found it crawling on a dead body. Maggot, maggot, maggot!"

Ragweed lost the argument, but the name stuck and passed into the lore of Deep Cave band, high up in the mountains, where Maggot had

spent seventeen years growing into his adulthood. Almost six and a half feet tall, all bone and muscle, he'd been too small and smelled all wrong to make a good troll. Finally, he'd left his mother behind and come down from the mountains again in search of a mate. A woman.

So far he'd seen nothing but men.

The man in blue stomped and shouted within a few yards of Maggot's tree. He carried a large section of log on a sash across his bare shoulder, so he must be very strong. Maggot picked his nose and flicked snot at the man's head but the man didn't notice anything.

People were stupid. Compared to trolls.

The man passed under the tree and into open sunlight. He wore strips of white skin wrapped around his feet and tied in a knot at top. Another skin skirted his waist, with blocks of green divided by cracks of sharp blue.

Maggot peered off into the deep, unexplored forest. He'd like to find the creature that had that skin.

Maybe he should steal this man's skin and wear it to make himself stink more like people, and that would help him find a woman. Maggot had been stealing things from people for the last five or six winters, whenever people crossed the mountain passes. So he'd seen a few human women. At least he thought they were women, although who could know for certain when they were covered with extra skins and the stink of dead things.

But he had discarded his people items, the skins and blankets, because it was too hot down here in the valleys with winter's snow already melted. He'd kept only the knife and spear — the small hard leaf, the hard leaf on the branch.

As he descended the tree to follow the man, Maggot heard shouts. He pressed aside the branches just in time to see the man pound his fists on the log he carried. Birds erupted from the trees and fled away to the sky. The log resonated with a deep, full sound, a troll greeting sound, like fists on a chest. For a second, Maggot's heart leapt into his throat, a loneliness too hard to swallow.

Retrieving his spear from the pile of needles, he eased out from the evergreen's sheltering cape. He sniffed experimentally, trying to smell something beside the scent of pine. Not for the first time, he wished for the broad flat nose of a troll.

He ran to a thick stand of brush and hid. The man with the log knuckled out a rhythm more complicated than any message used by the trolls while the others chanted words in a beat that matched their step. They repeated it over and over until it almost made Maggot crazy.

"*Lion, lion,*" he repeated with them, not knowing the word. "Ugh ugh ugh ugh ugh ugh!"

People talked stupid.

He mumbled it again and rapped his knuckles against his chest, shaking the knife-sheath that hung on a string about his neck. But for once his mimicking skills failed him. The pounding made no more sense as a message than did the words.

A quick scuttle to another cluster of trees upslope and he saw the next person in line — another man! By the time he reached the peak of the ridge, Maggot had counted four handfuls and two fingers of people, all men. Two more carried the big logs. Every fifth man, or thumb, held a large, flat disc of metal — the troll word described the taste of it — shaped like certain mushrooms. When the men tapped the mushrooms with sticks, they made a chilling ring. All the other men thrashed the brush with long branches.

Stupid men were scaring all the animals away and not just the birds. Maggot's stomach rumbled. There was little to eat here. The trees were just unfolding their leaves, sending forth seedlings that spun down to the ground like wounded butterflies and only the smallest flowers bloomed, little white stars and tiny blue-and-pink blossoms that hung upside down.

The man beating the brush nearest to Maggot stepped cautiously, careful not to tramp on any flowers. Maybe people scared winter off this way, Maggot thought. These lands were more fertile than the high mountains and earlier in the season too. Maybe this was the magic, the false-flavored nature, his mother had warned him to avoid.

He decided to run ahead of the men to see if there were any women farther down the valley. He crossed the ridge, but near the bottom of the slope he saw a flash of light, and dove instinctively into the cover of a thicket. Thorny branches scratched at his skin as he peered out.

A second line of silent people in drab clothes carried spears with the points thrust out in front of them. They stood closer together, angled toward the noisy log-and-mushroom men.

Maggot crouched his way along behind them, counting. There were more people here than in the largest troll band! And they were all men. Picking up a pine cone, he winged it at the back of the last man in line. The man's head snapped forward. He reached over and shoved his neighbor while Maggot grinned and backed away.

His stomach gurgled a second time. He escaped the closing jaws of these two lines of men and went off to find something to drink, maybe even something to eat, before he continued his search for a mate.

He jogged through the woods until the noise of the thrashers was faint, far behind him. He found a trickle of water and followed it down the hillside where it joined a stony brook that soon dropped over a steep incline. Maggot paused on a jutting rock at the hill's lip and looked at the stream's low, looping crawl toward a pond in the meadow. One dot of dark blue flitted across the sunlight, chased by another toward some distant nest. Maybe he would find fresh eggs here.

At the edge of the woods, beside the stream, he noticed scat. Bigtooth scat, from the size and shape of it. Dusty white — several days old at least. He bent and sniffed. It didn't smell fresh. Still, with a bigtooth in the area he would have to be much more careful about where he denned up. Though he might get a chance to steal fresh carrion.

He bent on hands and knees by the cool, clear pond. In his head, Maggot had always seen himself as a version of his mother, as a troll. The twig-nosed, nut-mouthed, shaggy-headed face in the water still surprised him. He brushed his hair over his embarrassing high forehead before a woman saw it.

Maybe if he spent more time among people, he'd start to see himself like them but find a troll in his reflection instead.

Before he could kiss his image to sip the water, he heard voices — people coming. He snatched up his spear and hid in the undergrowth while three people entered the meadow.

His breath caught in his mouth. His knees wobbled.

One of the people was a woman!

He straightened, inhaled, and leaned forward uncertainly.

She had saggy breasts, somewhat like a woman, and a round, smooth-skinned face like a woman. But her hips narrowed like a man's. Sunbright loops around her neck and similar bands around her arms echoed those the

men wore. Her skin was as black as polished rock and her hair was fog-colored like an old troll's bristle.

Maggot puffed out his cheeks and exhaled. He hoped women would be, well, he didn't know. More attractive.

The two other people were men. The younger had skin a soft brown color, with hair as black and thick as Maggot's. He was tall and lean, like Maggot, and had even less hair on his chin. The third man was bearded, pale like Maggot, his brown hair pulled back and twined like vines. Though not as tall as Foghair or the boy, his shoulders were broader and he looked stronger. Other men, carrying spears, joined them.

The bearded man studied the meadow carefully, following the edge of the pond over to the stream. When he found the bigtooth scat, he motioned the others over to investigate. He must be the First of their band, Maggot decided. Even Ragweed, who was not an especially good First, looked at things and brought them to the notice of other members of the band.

All of them were very excited by the smell, or sight, of the scat. They talked very quickly, gesticulating and pointing in the direction of the noise made by the log-and-mushroom men. The men with the spears made jabbing motions at the scat. So even people were wary of bigtooths. That showed some intelligence.

Foghair lifted a horn to her mouth and blew a series of short, clear notes. A few moments later, the clamor on the hillside shifted direction.

Then they filled their water bladders and spoke quietly among each other until they were interrupted by a crashing noise on the hillside. A white-tailed deer burst from the woods and froze, looking back toward the din of the log-and-mushroom men. Three more deer emerged from the trees and traipsed to a halt.

The boy tapped his chest. The bearded man, First, gestured to one of the spear-carriers, who passed his spear to Boy. Boy skipped forward and flung his spear, which rose into the air —

Maggot blinked, having never used one as more than a long arm with a claw on the end!

— and fell into the flank of the nearest deer, which bleated pain, collapsing as the other three scattered. The deer staggered up and dragged its rear legs in a circle, the spear bouncing wildly. One of the spear carriers

rushed forward and put the animal down with a second thrust through the throat.

Maggot felt a dead-end cave crack open into a wide new cavern — *you could throw spears.*

Maybe people weren't so stupid after all.

As the spear carriers emptied the guts out of the beast, Foghair blew her horn again. The drumming and ringing and thrashing stopped and all the others came in.

Two men tied the animal to a long pole. Maybe they were taking the meat to their women. Maggot had already decided to follow them to find out when he saw the mammut.

The shaggy red giant ambled into the meadow. Sun blazoned off metal knobs that adorned the ends of its tusks. A small man perched on its head behind the flapping ears. Stranger yet, a tent — a cave made out of sticks and skins, striped blue-and-yellow — sat astride its back. There were two people in it.

Boy presented the deer to the mammut riders, one of whom said something — the higher voice sounded like a woman's — before they turned away toward the lower valley, with the men carrying the deer, and the others chasing after. Maggot followed them, like a shadow stretched out far and behind by a low sun.

Their trail paralleled a stream to where it met a river gushing over a rocky bed. The men approached a village of tents — a cluster of caves made of skins like the one on the back of the elephant — at the river's edge. Fires burned there, making Maggot wary. That magic eluded him. The only time he had ever tried to take hold of fire, he'd burned his hand.

Maggot hid in a large copse of trees that occupied a slight rise at the river's edge, downstream from the camp where too many men moved about constantly, like bees at a hive, making them impossible to count. Though he watched for a time, he saw no more women and he began to despair that Foghair was the only one after all.

Exhausted, Maggot sipped from the river, then crawled under a fallen log and covered himself with leaves for a brief nap. He awoke refreshed, with the moon only half itself and dropping out of the sky. Though he moved about in the day now, and had for many years, despite his mother's fears, some part of him still felt more comfortable at night. When he crept

forth for a closer look, he left his spear behind so he could have both hands free for scavenging. His knife still dangled from the string around his neck.

He approached the darkened camp slowly, anxious at the smell of fire and burned meat, wondering how he'd find the women here if there were any. He finally worked up his nerve to enter the camp's perimeter when one of the tents moved.

Maggot froze.

The huge bulk of the tent budged again, then lifted a snake-like appendage into the air.

The mammut! It swayed like an old tree in a long wind. Maggot had known mammutts before, especially on the morning side of the mountain range. Trolls and mammutts fed side by side sometimes during the summer nights. Maggot had always been fond of the creatures because they were bigger than trolls. Even Ragweed looked diminutive next to one.

The little cave was no longer on its back. Maggot approached it gently, reaching out to pat its side. Big clumps of winter fur came loose at his touch. The trunk turned around, snaking over his shoulders, his head. All the while, the mammut rocked, lifting its back leg, dropping it, repeating the motion, until Maggot noticed the iron band affixed to its ankle. The mammut was chained to a stake driven deep in the ground.

That just smells wrong, Maggot thought as he hunkered down to examine the stake. It was the size of a small stump and buried deep. Gripping it with both hands, he braced his shoulders and tugged. The soil was soft. He wiggled the stake from side to side, pulling until it came free.

Shoving the animal's hard, unyielding side with his hand, Maggot whispered, "Go on, go away."

The shaggy creature shuffled in place.

A buzzing snore droned out from one of the nearby tents. Maggot spun around — he had forgotten to watch the tents. Leaving the mammut, he slouched toward the new noise, alert for signs of movement, his heart pounding at his own stupid distraction. He spotted one of the logs that the men carried through the woods propped at an entrance flap to one of the tents. He hefted it, expecting a heavy weight, but found it remarkably light. He saw at once that it was hollow, with the ends covered by some stretched skin. People did a lot with skins. Maybe because theirs were so thin. He tapped the end with his fingertips and the sound made him jump.

Maggot felt suddenly nervous around all these people — these men — and their things. Carrying the log under one arm, he hurried a short ways distant.

Sitting down at the base of a tree, he propped the log between his legs. He tapped at it again with the tips of his fingers and it made a light noise.

It reminded him of woodpeckers drilling dead trees. He smiled, wishing he'd had something like this among the trolls. He could have sounded almost like them then. With his fists, he pounded out the danger-death warning. The log resonated just like Ragweed's chest. He repeated it a couple times, adding a shrill scream at the end. He grinned, imagining the reaction of other trolls.

Looking back in wonder at the camp of men who made such things, he noticed some of them clearly illuminated by a big fire that hadn't been burning as brightly a short while before.

First stood there, with Foghair by his side. Maggot recognized them by their posture, as surely as he would recognize a member of any band.

Maggot prepared to flee into the farther darkness, to retrieve his spear, when the mammut trumpeted somewhere far beyond the camp. It had wandered away after all.

Maggot laughed. "Run, mammut, run."

And that's when he saw her. A woman. The Woman.

She came out of a tent and stood between Foghair and First beside the fire. She was taller than First, almost as tall as Foghair, with firelight glinting on her dark hair and tanned skin. Her long robe gapped open at the neck to reveal the curve of her breasts. Many of the men showed fear in their posture — even Maggot, with his puny nose, could smell it on them — but she stood there with her fists on her hips and stared curiously into the dark.

A second woman, whom Maggot scarcely noticed, snatched at her sleeve like a small bird plucking straws, but she shrugged it off. First said something, and she grinned. He said something else, and her laughter rang through the night, splashing over Maggot like cold water.

Maggot had felt the need to mate many times. The feeling that surged through him now had as little in common with that urge as a flower did with the giant poplar trees. He had no name for it. It threatened to drown him, like a mountain stream after a sudden cloudburst.

Still holding onto the drum, he crawled backward. Then he ran. He ran as fast he could, away from the tents and into the night, and it wasn't until he was far up in the hills that he realized he'd left his spear behind.

When daylight was stalking the hills above the valley, he finally found what he sought, a crack between two rocks beneath an overhanging stone. He pawed in the mud, enlarging the opening. When he crawled inside he found a good den, ripe with the old, faint stench of skunk.

From the inside Maggot dug the hole bigger until he could pull the hollow log in with him. It was a good den, though not big enough for him to stretch his legs out full-length. He rolled one way, then the other, then flopped over and over, trying to get comfortable enough to sleep. Once, he nearly dozed off, but was startled awake when his leg twitched, kicking the log.

Awake, he couldn't stop the thoughts. He'd been afraid. He didn't understand it. Yes, he'd been afraid many times before when wrestling trolls much larger than himself or hunting down creatures whose horns were sharper than his sticks. Venturing into daylight the first time despite his mother's warning. This didn't feel anything like those. Why should he be afraid of this woman? Had he not wrestled Little Thunder's son, Stinker, and won? Had he not killed stags in the mountains with sharp sticks and his own bare strength? Had he not turned his face toward the sun and not been turned to stone?

He had to go back to the skin-caves to see the woman again. To give her an interest gift. To show her his intentions.

Wrapping his arm around the log-drum, he held it tight, thinking of her until he fell into a restless sleep.

MAGGOT AWOKE with darkness rising, went outside, and pissed on the stones to mark the cave as his. Leaving the log behind, he ran bare-handed down to the river in the moonlight.

He hadn't eaten much for two or three nights, so when he spotted the conspicuous purple-globed flowers of wild onions, he stopped to dig up several mouthfuls. The bulbs were small, so he satisfied his hunger by chewing on the pungent green stems.

Twice, on his way, he surprised deer and chased after them. Neither

time did he catch one, and he thought again about that spear-throwing trick. Yes, that could be a very useful skill.

The moon was crawling into its cave when he reached the camp, but the light from it was still enough to illuminate a transformed landscape. The copse of trees that had sheltered him was nearly gone; all that remained were the few largest trees, some deadwood, and piles of branches. A rough palisade of upright logs now surrounded the tents.

Maggot skulked through the remains of the copse until he found the fallen, rotting tree where he'd hidden before. He thrust his hand into the leaf-filled pit beneath it, fishing around until he found his spear. Resting the shaft across his thighs, he squatted down behind the log to watch the camp for some glimpse of the woman — the Woman.

Above his head, a red-breasted bird began to trill at the dawn. Its song sounded uncertain, confused at the sudden absence of trees and shelter that had been there only a day before, or perhaps calling for a mate or nestlings that were no longer there. Maggot listened to it, wondering what would be the proper gift to show the woman his interest, and caught himself in a sigh. Nothing ordinary would do.

People began to stir in the camp, shadows among shadows. Maggot crawled down for a closer look. Twigs tangled in his hair as he squirmed through a wallow and peered over a rugged lip of dirt.

The log-and-mushroom men gathered outside the palisade, along with the spear-carriers. Shortly afterward, the mammut came striding forth — so they'd recaptured it. Too bad. The little cave was perched upon its back with the man riding just behind its head again. The mammut rider shouted something — and the creature bent on its front legs!

This, this was certainly magic, the wrong-tasting nature, that his mother —

Maggot craned forward suddenly as he spied the woman walking over to the mammut.

She wore tight-fitting pants and a loose, open-breasted shirt like many of the men, but the curves of her body were distinctly feminine. When she clapped her hands and laughed, Maggot's heart pounded and a shiver coursed up his spine and down again. The other, birdlike woman accompanied her, but Maggot scarcely noticed her. The woman and her

female companion climbed up the mammut's side and sat within the little stick cave.

With much shouting and noise, the people set out all at once, like a great band of trolls going to feed at dusk. The mammut lumbered among them, carrying away the woman.

Maggot rose to his feet and followed them at a distance as they traced the river toward its source in the mountains. Pairs of spear-carriers ranged outside the main group. With his newfound respect for the way they threw their weapons, Maggot could not come close enough to see the woman's features. But the blue-and-yellow tent atop the mammut bobbed along at the edge of his vision, always in view.

She was looking for something from her perch; all these people were looking for something. The deer perhaps, like the one they had killed yesterday. He'd have to get it first and bring it to her.

Miles upstream from the camp, the procession turned aside from the river plain and spread out along the edge of the forest. Maggot ran up to the first ridgeline to get above the people and observe them. Crabbing his way from tree to brush, he found Foghair with First and the Boy and several other men, following the smaller streams that fed the river. They knelt by something and grew excited, then hurried on. Maggot ran to the spot as they left it.

Scat. Bigtooth scat. And fresh, no more than a day old. They hunted the solitary bigtooth cat the way that packs of little bigtooths hunted, with some lying in wait while others chased the deer or bison into their clutches.

Maggot reached behind his head and traced a fingertip over the hard ridge of the scar that crossed the back of his neck and into the thin hair of his scalp. He had surprised a bigtooth once before, in a cave in the lower mountains by the southern pass. Or rather the bigtooth had surprised him. He'd woken from his sleep one day with the cat's mouth closed around his head. He had his knife at hand and his mother nearby, or he wouldn't have escaped. It had taken a long time for his skin to knit together and heal, and he had been sick with a fever for many days. His nostrils flared at the memory. He had never killed a cat before.

He squatted on his haunches and poked his finger at the scat, breaking it into big chunks.

Lifting his head, he looked downslope where the woman rode on the back of the mammut. And sighed. He hefted the spear in his hand and mimed throwing it. Maybe he wouldn't have to get too close to the bigtooth.

Or — maybe — he'd let the people kill the bigtooth. He could steal it from them and then give it to the woman.

With that thought, he retreated into the trees. But although the stupid people made their big noise all day, over a series of forested ridges and through several long ravines, they didn't flush the bigtooth once. By the end of the hunt, Maggot was checking to see if they had tails — they chattered as noisily as squirrels and seemed about as dangerous.

As the whole mob began its disordered ramble back toward their newly palisaded camp, he ventured close for one last glimpse of the woman. All he saw was the striped tent bobbing on the mammut's back, until that too finally dipped below the horizon. So it had been wishing for snow in summer's heat to think he could steal the bigtooth. He'd have to go find it.

A single bigtooth would range over land occupied by several troll bands, days and days of walking. But they tended to stay in one area as long as they found easy prey, and they always stayed near the watercourses. He stared out across the floodplain, watching the river come down from its source in the mountains. Deer moved up to the higher slopes in the spring. The bigtooth had to be following them.

Twilight cast its uncertain mist across the landscape. Maggot raised his head to the sky and saw the evening star — what the trolls called One-Eyed Mouth. It beckoned to them from their caves in the evening, calling them out to feed.

He lifted the spear another time as if to throw it.

Heading upriver in the fading light, he followed the trail from ravine to creek to ravine, until hungry and thirsty, he paused at the mouth of a larger tributary stream for a drink. The perch was too steep to sip from, so, cupping his hand in the current, he splashed water into his mouth.

Across the stream, a few large shadows detached themselves from the stillness at his noise and slipped silently into the woods. Deer. Maggot snatched up his spear and followed their movement into the hills.

The stream babbled over a wide bed of rocks, making frequent and

sudden falls. The mountain walls were steep on either side, thick with trees, and marked by sudden sprays of water that gushed out of narrow defiles. Maggot climbed upward over this rough terrain until the land opened out at last on marshy flats.

Vague shapes moved across a gray landscape of soft-edged growth and smooth, dark planes of water — a herd of several dozen grazing deer. Maggot skirted them slowly.

A bigtooth roared somewhere over the hills — the deer lifted their heads toward the sound and scattered.

Maggot ran, his feet splashing, toward the hilltop nearest the source of the roar. He practiced throwing motions with the spear as he went.

The moon was a little fuller tonight, and still in the sky, casting a pale light among the trees. When he reached the higher, drier land he circled through the woods, looking for any sign of movement, listening for any sound.

Off to his right, across flatter ground, he heard the snarling and snapping of wolves. He took a few hesitant steps that way.

The bigtooth growled from the same direction.

Maggot sniffed the air, looked at the clouds above the trees, and then angled through the forest to come at the noise from downwind. He saw the timber wolves first, counted five of them. They stalked the bigtooth, who sat in a little clearing in a puddle of moonlight, crouched over a large doe, with an arm cast across the body like a mother protecting its child. It had chewed off the doe's head.

The two dagger-shaped teeth jutting from the upper jaw were longer and wider than Maggot's knife. The short bobbed tail twitched at the back of the cat's massive, stocky body.

One wolf lunged at the bigtooth's flank, and the cat surged up to bat it with its massive paw. But as soon as the bigtooth moved, two other wolves darted in and tore at the carrion. One grabbed hold of the front leg and dragged it several feet before the bigtooth turned on it, snarling, and drove them away.

The wolves could take the meat — Maggot wanted the bigtooth. He chose a tree he could climb easily, and then, visualizing the way the boy had killed the deer, he lifted the spear, aimed it at bigtooth's heart, and threw it.

It sailed wide of his target, and over it, to crash sideways into some bushes.

He grabbed his head in dismay — stupid people! Why did they throw their spears like that?

As the cat whirled to meet the new threat intimidated by the sound of the spear hitting the brush, the wolves seized the chance and the meat. Two snapped at the bigtooth to hold it at bay while two others lunged in and dragged off part of the doe. The wolves retreated a short way with their trophy and the bigtooth turned to eat the rest before it was all gone.

The fifth wolf trotted curiously in Maggot's direction and he scrambled up the tree to escape it. Sitting fifteen feet up, Maggot hurled insults at it because he didn't have any rocks.

Maggot watched the wolf turn aside for its portion of the meat and spat after it. He was stupid with the spear for thinking that being people would be so easy. He would have to try to find it later, or steal a new one.

When the wolves began to harass the bigtooth again, the cat decided that it had eaten enough and abandoned the remainder to them. It set off with a slow, arrogant stride on a trail that led around the hill and down to the streamside.

The woman wanted the bigtooth. Was she worth the danger?

With the carrion distracting the wolves, Maggot decided to chance it. He dropped from his branch, sprinted over the hilltop, climbed another tree by the trail, and waited, hoping.

Trolls rarely attacked living creatures, but when they did, it was like this: they hung on the face of a steep rock wall, or cliff, and dropped on their prey as it passed below. They wrapped it up in their long arms and bit its neck, or clawed open the stomach with one of their hands. Maggot had perfected the technique when he was small by dropping from trees on Ragweed's neck. Ragweed never looked up at the trees. At least not at first.

Neither did the bigtooth cat — Maggot hoped it didn't get a second chance to learn from its mistake.

The big cat swaggered along the deer trail, shifting its head from side to side, its tongue lapping the long teeth. As it passed beneath the limb on which Maggot sat, he leapt onto its back. He snaked one arm around its throat, and braced his legs to stop its first attempt to roll over on its side. It turned its head, slashing its jaws at Maggot as he plunged his knife

between its ribs, deep. The cat roared, twisted, and Maggot kicked his feet, fending off its rear legs as the claws came up to gut him. He wrenched the knife free, stabbing the cat's breast again and again.

The bigtooth growled, ripped its head from Maggot's grasp, and rolled the other direction. Maggot dropped his knife and jumped for the tree. He pulled himself up onto a branch as the big cat slammed into the trunk. Maggot slipped, caught himself, looped a leg over the next branch, and heaved himself higher. The bigtooth paced at the base of the trunk, its side glistening slick with blood.

Maggot dripped sweat. He couldn't catch his breath. The bigtooth's blood mixed with his own — he'd been cut on his side, the back of his calf, scraped his leg climbing the tree.

"If you aren't going to die," he gasped, "then go away."

The bigtooth seemed to like this advice because it suddenly started running down the trail. Before it passed out of sight, it staggered and collapsed face first.

Though it lay there motionless, Maggot hesitated to drop from the tree until he considered that the wolves might come investigate and then he'd have to fight them off. He didn't have the strength for that, so he climbed down, retrieved his knife, and picked up a long stick.

He poked the bigtooth with the stick. It didn't move. He cracked the stick over its side. It still didn't move. He inched closer and shoved it with his toe — it was like kicking a warm rock, but it didn't kick back.

Then, placing one foot on its side, Maggot pounded the danger-death warning on his chest, and laughed.

"Too late," he told the bigtooth. "Sorry."

When he nudged it with a toe, his grin turned to a frown.

He couldn't carry the whole beast back down the valley to give to the woman. Maybe he could just show her part of it. The skin, since people seemed to use so many skins.

Looking at it again, he wanted the claws too so he could show how brave he was. And the teeth.

Maggot knelt and took the front paw in his hand — it still had a deadly weight to it. He sawed with his knife, breaking the joints at the ankle to remove the big clawed feet but leave them attached to the pelt. Then he sliced up the belly, and the legs, and hacking, pulling, finally removed the

skin in one piece, leaving it connected to the head, which he also cut off. He ate the liver as he worked, and strips of the meat, which were strong-tasting and stringy, but satisfied his empty stomach.

When he finished and looked up, vultures circled in the dawn-pale sky. They could have the rest.

Rolling up his trophy, Maggot slung it over his shoulder and took the long way around the stream so he wouldn't wash off any of his impressive scent.

He grew tired like any troll in the morning. Before he returned to the woman's camp, he climbed into the crook of an elm tree and settled down to nap in the notch where its trunk divided into three.

Ants crawling across his skin to get at the bigtooth jerked him awake. He squinted at the sky, turning his head to find the sun. He'd slept straight through the warm part of the day.

He brushed the ants off the bigtooth's tongue and eyes, off the long yellow teeth, licking them off his fingers for a snack as he climbed down and resumed his journey. The cuts on his calf and side throbbed, and a bark scrape on his thigh hurt, but it was nothing bad. When he looked away from them, he forgot that his wounds were there.

The mammut, spear-carriers, log-and-mushroom men, and others left trampled grasses, broken limbs, and other signs of their passing along the riverside, an easy trail for Maggot to follow. They had returned for a second day of beating brush in the hills, not knowing their quarry was already dead. Maggot smiled as he went, imagining the woman's surprise when he brought her his gift.

The sun was low behind the mountains, the sky as red as blueberry leaves in autumn, when their camp came into view. Fires burned inside the palisade. Maggot circled around to the hill beside the river, above the camp where he could see over the wall. He concealed himself in the remaining trees to look for the woman again.

He saw her for only a heartbeat, taking long strides through the firelight between tents. She entered one with blue and yellow stripes, like the covering on the mammut's back. He counted carefully — it stood in the second arc, third from the end.

When hardly anyone moved about the camp, Maggot took the bigtooth's skin and approached the palisade. Not seeing anyone or anything

moving through the cracks, he slung the pelt over his shoulder and vaulted the wall.

He tried counting the tents, orienting himself, but the smoky, meaty stink of all these people made him jumpy. He started walking fast, then running, in what he thought was the right direction. He was rounding the second arc when he came face to face with one of the spear men.

The man looked at Maggot, looked at the bigtooth's pelt, looked at Maggot, and opened his mouth to scream.

Maggot panicked. He grabbed the man by the throat, twisting his head hard as he dragged him to the ground the way he would wrestle a troll. The man went limp when Maggot landed on him. Maggot rolled away, hand still covering the mouth for silence, when he realized that he'd broken the man's neck.

His heart thumped in his chest — other voices sounded nearby, coming closer. He'd dropped the pelt when he lunged. He scooped it up and spotted the woman's striped tent, third from the end, just as he had counted. Dashing to it, he pulled aside the flap and plunged inside.

A fire burned in a polished dish, illuminating the interior to day-like brightness. Maggot blinked.

The woman sat on something beside the fire. She started to move, then stopped when Maggot stopped.

He gaped. Her hair had become suddenly long, longer than Maggot's. The other, older woman held it — pausing in midstroke as she ran something like a knife across it. Maybe she was cutting it —

"You st-stink," Maggot stammered quickly, in proper troll fashion, before he lost his courage. "You stink a lot."

The older woman's mouth opened and closed like a fish surfacing to eat.

Afraid that she would scream, Maggot quickly made a vigorous "No" expression by thrusting his tongue and shaking his head from side to side.

The woman reached out a restraining hand to her companion. Never taking her eyes off the bigtooth's skin, she said something that Maggot couldn't understand.

But what was there to understand? She was even more beautiful than he'd imagined her, with sharp lines to her face and a broad, flat nose. She had blue eyes matched in color by a gem that dangled on a golden vine

around her neck. Her yellow robe opened at her throat and was slit up the side so that her legs stretched free. She smelled like lavender and lilac.

He fumbled with the skin, holding it out for her.

She raised her eyebrows, said something again.

"It's for y-you," he said, thrusting it out again for her to take.

She glanced up at the older woman, shrugged, and gestured to a spot at her feet.

Yes! He dropped to his knees and spread the pelt out on the floor, tilting the head up to her, making sure she could see the claws. When he stood up, his heart was galloping.

She bent forward to look at it, said something again.

Maggot took this as a hopeful sign of her interest, and, just to make his intentions clear, stepped close to her, spread his legs apart, and waved his painfully swollen sex at her face.

She leaned back in her seat...then sprang forward and kicked him hard in the crotch.

He toppled like a tree in a storm, slamming into the dirt so hard that it knocked all the air out of him. He tried to inhale, but couldn't catch his breath at all. Probably because his sex was lodged in his throat.

She grabbed a long knife and held it toward him, prodding him with the toe of her foot much as he had done to the bigtooth. When he didn't move, she stepped away and examined the pelt, flipping over the paws, looking at the teeth. She spoke to him the whole time.

He didn't understand the words, but her tone was clearly admonishing. Somehow he propped himself upright on knees and elbows, gulping air, looking at her, trying to fathom what he'd done wrong.

There was a shout outside the tent, and the woman stood and turned sharply toward it. When she moved, Maggot could see her sex through the part in her robe. Though it was obscured by a patch of curly hair, it was clearly not swollen or red. She wasn't interested in him after all. Glancing down at him, she followed his eyes and pulled her robe closed and stepped away from him. A second shout came outside, more frantic than the first. The older woman ran to the entrance of the tent and shouted out a reply.

Maggot realized that they'd discovered the body of the man he'd killed. And there was no reason for him to stay now. He stumbled to his

feet and lurched past the older woman to leave the tent. He paused a second to orient himself.

The flap flew open behind him. The woman stood at the entrance, her hand reaching toward him as she said something else he couldn't understand. The long knife was lowered.

Probably she was asking him if he wanted the bigtooth's skin back. He stuck out his tongue and shook his head from side to side. Then, cupping his crotch, Maggot ran despite the pain, heading for the main gate because he knew he couldn't climb the palisade. Separated by the wall of tents, men sprinted past him in the other direction.

Only one guard watched the entrance. Grimacing in pain, Maggot lifted his fist to force his way past. The guard took one look at him, threw down his spear, and fled screaming into the night.

Maggot followed: When he overtook the guard, the man covered his face with his hands, shrieked, and fell down.

Maggot ran until the pain in his groin faded compared to the ache in his legs and in his chest. The moon chased after him, a sliver more than half full ensconced within a bright sphere of hazy light. Rains were coming. Maggot kept on running into the hills, toward the tree-covered slopes of the mountains.

Finally, exhausted, he reeled from tree to tree, looking for someplace to hide from the rising sun. The hillside was pierced by out-thrusts of massive lichen-covered stones, thick with nut trees and berry bushes. Smells of redolent spring earth and verdant damp pervaded the air. It was a very trollish place. He'd fled the life of a troll to become a man. Now he returned to trollish habits, following the natural shelter of the hills in search of a safe location, hoping to find the hole where he'd hidden the drum.

He was scouring a hillside when he saw, in a dell below, a den-shaped mound covered with thick vines and shrubs. Hickory trees towered protectively around it. He went to explore.

Taking hold of the vines, Maggot pulled himself atop the mound. It was constructed of logs, like the palisade but stacked atop one another. A wall and part of the sheltering roof had collapsed at one end, but a fallen tree canopied the hole—its dead branches sustained a mass of fallen limbs and brown leaves. Some of the logs pulled away in Maggot's hands,

revealing a spacious den. He crawled inside. The hollow extended nearly the full length of the mound. In parts of it he could stand straight up. It was a good place to hide for the day. To decide where he should go, what he should do next.

He sagged against the darkest corner and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to forget the woman. But an ache in his heart worse than the pain in his groin made him toss and stay awake.

DAYLIGHT CRACKED open the sky. Maggot rolled over and stretched his tired limbs. Dusty sunlight penetrated the room, illuminating the scattered bones of maybe two people. And a tiny, cracked skull that clearly belonged to a troll. Maggot jerked upright.

The bones were partly hidden by a beam where the roof had fallen in. He braced his shoulder under the rotting wood and heaved it aside — leaves and dust showered over him. A little stripe-back ground squirrel scampered across Maggot's foot then zagged back into safe cover of the collapsed wall.

A baby troll's bones were nested against a human skeleton. A troll and a man, together.

It disturbed him that light should fall on this child's bones and prevent the soul that once wore them from finding its way back into the comforting darkness. He looked up — this was a poor imitation of a cave. Eventually it must collapse, and that might leave the bones completely exposed.

He probed the dirt with his fingers, loosening a thin layer of decaying leaves and dead vines. Beneath that he found it packed hard. He saw stones in one of the corners. He pried several up out of the ground until he found a large, flat one with a sharp edge. If he scraped a hole and buried the bones so that they should stay in darkness long after the logs all fell and rotted.

Raising the stone high above his head, he plunged it into the dirt. The edge bit the soil. He worked mindlessly, forgetting himself in the good pain of muscle and bone bent to a purpose until he'd finished a shallow pit.

He picked up the skull, his thumb fitting in the bony ridge of the brow. His other hand took the tiny lower jaw.

"Who are you?" he asked. He was thinking how Windy had found him, adopted him — here a human mother must have found and adopted this baby troll. "How did you get here?"

He held the skull and jaw together, opening and closing the mouth. The teeth clicked against each other, but his little counterpart said nothing to him.

Gently placing the skull in the pit, Maggot turned to gather the long bones of the arms and legs, glad that no big scavengers had cracked them open for their marrow. The knobby backbones were easy to scoop up, but the ribs and the small bones of the hands and feet were scattered either by smaller vermin or the vagaries of time. Maggot dug through the humus and roots, determined to gather them all if he could. Strands of long red hair were tangled in some of the bones. No troll had hair that long or that color, so he plucked them free before placing the bones in the pit.

The longer he worked, the longer he avoided any thought of the woman. He didn't know what to do. He still desired her. But he didn't understand people, didn't know how to be one, didn't know why he'd expected it to be so easy to get her to show interest in him.

He kicked the dirt into the trench, nudged the flat stone over it with his toe to cover the bones, and sighed.

He let himself look at the other skeletons. Being creatures of the day, perhaps they wanted their souls to bask in sunlight. He didn't know. He decided to leave them as they were, not knowing the proper way to show respect.

Something glinted inside one ribcage. He bent to look. Two tiny gemlike shapes, as smooth as pebbles from a stream but shining with some inner light, were strung on tarnished strands of silver about the neck. Maggot thought at once of the woman and the blue gem that dangled from her throat. He palmed the skull, snapping it to one side so that he could lift the two strands out of the body. Untangling them from the ribs, he draped them around his own neck, slipping them under the sheath that held his knife. The chains felt cold around his skin but the lucent stones pulsed with faint heat against his naked chest. Now he had something that made him more like the woman and connected him to her.

He squeezed the stones in his fist. He could never go back to being a troll or even to living among them. Just because he didn't impress the first

woman he met didn't mean he would never find his mate. He would have to learn their ways.

Sunlight no longer drifted into the den but it was too soon to be night again already. He crawled out through the hole, looking up and sniffing the air. Dark clouds scudded across the sky. Trees shook in a wind that smelled like thunderstorms.

Branches fell from the treetops. Maggot spied one lying on the ground that was mostly straight and about the length of a spear. He lifted it, aimed it at a distant trunk, and threw. It sailed wide in the wind.

As the first fat drops of water slapped his shoulders, Maggot ran to pick up the stick and try again.



"It's a great read!"



SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

SCIENCE fiction is about revolutionary ideas and amazing inventions. In this column, we're going to talk about something that is both. It's a very simple thing — so simple that most people don't think about it at all. Over the centuries, people have come to take this invention for granted. But at the Exploratorium we are in the business of paying attention to things that other people ignore, and we've decided it's time to call attention to this remarkable invention.

This idea was the brainchild of a group of astronomers in the Indus Valley about fifteen hundred years ago (give or take a century). Back in the fifteenth century, the impact of this invention on the mathematics of Europe could be compared to the social changes resulting from computers today. What is it?

Why, it's nothing.

That is, it's the zero, a little bit of nothing bounded by a line in the shape of a goose egg. The invention of the zero revolutionized the practice of mathematics and, in the process, made modern science possible. And yet we have noticed that lots of science fiction deals with the concept of infinity, but not so much deals with nothing. In an effort to correct this oversight, we will tell you a bit about the weird history of zero, about a century-long battle between the Abacists and the Algorithmists, about the year zero, and about the difficulty of counting. With any luck, some science fiction writers reading these pages will be inspired.

COUNT LIKE A ROMAN

To understand how the zero transformed mathematics, we need to take a close look at a numerical system that doesn't use a zero. For

simplicity's sake, let's consider Roman numerals, one of the most familiar of the numbering systems that preceded the zero's invention. In Roman numerals, different symbols stand for different numbers. As you probably learned in elementary school, I stands for one, V stands for five, and X for ten. If you want to count higher, you also need to know that L stands for fifty, C for 100, D for 500, and M for 1000.

To write a number, you combine these signs according to certain rules. If you place a sign for a smaller unit to the right of a larger unit, you add the numbers together: VI stands for five plus one, or six. But if you place a smaller unit to the left of a larger unit, you subtract the small one from the big one: IV translates to five minus one, or four. MCMLVI, for example, represents 1956. (Moving from left to right, M equals 1000; CM equals 900; L equals 50; VI equals 6. Add them all together and you get 1956.

This system has one obvious drawback. You've got seven symbols so far and you can write numbers in the thousands. But if you want to count higher, you need more symbols. A bar over a Roman numeral indicates thousands. Symbols exist for ten thousand, fifty thousand, and so on. But additional sym-

bols don't solve the basic problem: the higher you go, the more symbols you need. Without the zero, there's no upper limit to the number of symbols you need to write numbers.

Now compare Roman numerals to our present system. Using a zero and nine other symbols, we can write very large numbers. That's because we use a place-value system, in which the position of a symbol is just as important as the symbol itself. The symbol 8 may mean eight, eighty, eight hundred, or eight thousand. It all depends on its position or place. The 8 in 893 stands for eight hundred, but the 8 in 983 stands for 80. The symbol's value depends on which column it's in.

The ancient Babylonians came up with the idea of a place-value system, but they didn't have the zero — and that led to problems. Suppose one of the places is empty. You might have eight hundreds, for example, but no tens and no ones. The Babylonians left a blank space when a position was empty. But a scribe in a hurry could easily omit this space, changing the value of a number. Eventually, the Babylonians started using a dot as a zero, but they omitted this placeholder when it was on the right side of a number. The resulting notations

were ambiguous. Without the zero on the right, 11 looks just like 110.

WRITING REALLY BIG NUMBERS

Finally, early in the sixth century A.D., the zero came along. A group of Indian astronomers were looking for a numerical system that allowed them to represent large numbers easily. They knew of the Babylonian place-value system. They had symbols — the Brahmi numerals — for the numbers one to nine. And they used the counting board, a calculating device that lent itself to thinking about empty places.

The counting board took many forms, but generally all the versions used parallel lines or columns and some system of counters. A common form was a board marked with parallel columns. Flat disks or counters known as *calculi* (which means “pebbles” in Latin) were placed in the columns. The column in which a counter rested determined its value. Going from right to left, each counter in the first column stood for a single unit; each counter in the second column stood for ten units; each counter in the third column stood for one hundred units.

Sound familiar? The columns of the counting board match the positions we use to write numbers:

ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, and so on.

Those Indian astronomers realized that they could record the number of counters in each column of the counting board using their Brahmi numerals. But their stroke of genius relates to the columns in which there were no counters. To note an empty column, they made a zero symbol: originally a small dot, later on a circle or cross.

This new system let them write large numbers with ease, using the nine Brahmi numerals and the zero (which wasn’t regarded as a numeral). Zero was just a mark to put in any empty place. The notion that zero is a number like any other is a modern idea, not part of the original concept.

The new system also made arithmetic calculations easier. It’s tough to multiply and divide using Roman numerals. It can be done, but it isn’t easy. When the Romans wanted to multiply or divide or do any other complicated arithmetic problem, they used a counting board or an abacus. (More on counting boards in a bit.)

THE MAGIC CIPHER

This system of writing numbers invented by the Indian astronomers

spread to Europe by way of the Arab culture, following the rise of the Islamic empire. (In 732 A.D., the Islamic Empire reached from the borders of China to Spain.) Before the end of the tenth century, the Arabs of Spain had begun using the Hindu system of reckoning.

In the Middle Ages, when the Arabic-Hindu numerals that we now use were first introduced in Europe, people regarded them with great distrust. The most magical and powerful of those symbols was, of course, the zero, a mysterious and bewildering sign. Sometimes a zero was nothing at all. But if you put it to the right of another numeral, it multiplied the value of the number by ten. How could this be?

The transition from Roman numerals to the new Hindu-Arabic system took centuries, lasting from the twelfth until the fifteenth century. Abacists, who defended the use of the counting table, battled the Algorists, who preferred the new numbers. Distrust of the foreign numerals gave the Abacists an edge. In 1299, the City of Florence required the use of Roman numerals in account books, outlawing the new numerals in an effort to prevent fraud. The government feared that the new numerals could easily be falsified, since a zero could be

transformed into a 6 or an 8 or a 9. For this reason, documents written with Roman numerals carried more weight in court.

Despite the suspicion and confusion, the new numerals became increasingly important in commerce. In fifteenth-century Italy and Germany, merchants learned the arts of bookkeeping, computation, and calculation with the foreign numerals. Toward the end of the century, mercantile houses and offices were using the new numerals in their everyday calculations. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Algorists had won. In fact, by the eighteenth century, Europeans had completely forgotten the counting board and the abacus, tools that had proven useful for centuries. In the nineteenth century, one of Napoleon's generals who had been captured by the Russians returned to France with a Russian abacus, which was regarded as a curiosity. The adoption of zero had rendered it obsolete.

THE BEGINNING OR THE END

Today, the zero is part of our mathematics — but there are still indications that suggest we are not entirely comfortable with the goose egg that represents a little bit of

nothing. Many tall buildings lack a 13th floor, skipping from 12 to 14 to avoid that dreaded number. Most buildings — at least in the U.S.A. — also lack a zeroth floor. (You'll find a zeroth floor in a few buildings housing math departments and in lots of buildings in the Spanish-speaking world.)

You can make people uneasy by asking them whether zero is a number or not. And if it's a number, is it even or odd?

According to Paul, zero is indeed a number. It's an integer, one of the group of numbers that includes all the counting numbers (1, 2, 3, and so on), their negatives, and zero. Zero is considered to be even, but neither negative nor positive. (One interesting way to include zero in a list of integers is to say "all non-negative numbers," thus describing all the positive numbers plus zero.)

But even though zero is a number, it's a tricky one that comes with its own set of rules.

Add zero to any number and you get that number: $0 + 2 = 2$

Subtract zero from any number and you get that number: $2 - 0 = 2$

Add zero to itself and you get zero: $0 + 0 = 0$

Multiply any number by zero and you get zero: $0 \times 2 = 0$

Multiply zero by itself and you get zero: $0 \times 0 = 0$

The Indian mathematicians who invented zero knew all this. But they slipped up (according to modern mathematicians) when it came to the value of $1/0$. Mahavira, an Indian mathematician living in 830 A.D., published that $1/0 = 0$, which is certainly wrong.

But before we take issue with Mahavira, what do you think the value of $1/0$ is? Infinity, perhaps?

Mathematicians say that $1/0$ is meaningless. Here's how they think about it. Consider that division is the inverse of multiplication. If $10/5 = 2$, then you can multiply both sides by 5 to get $10 = 5 \times 2$.

Follow that logic through with $1/0$. If $1/0 = N$, then you can multiply both sides by 0 to get $1 = 0 \times N$. But any number multiplied by 0 equals 0. So there is no number N that will multiply zero to produce 1. There is no answer! What you get when you divide 1 by 0 is no number. The operation $1/0$ is meaningless.

(This reminds Paul of Odysseus, who told the Cyclops that his name was "no man" and then poked out the Cyclops's eye. The Cyclops then complained that "no man" had poked out his eye. In the story of $1/0$, the culprit is "no number.")

Things get even more interesting when you divide zero by zero: $0/0 = ?$ What do you think the answer is? Many people think the answer is 1 since any number (other than 0) divided by itself is 1.

But think about that for a moment. Could the answer be 0? After all, any number with 0 in the numerator is zero. Or could the answer be no number at all, since any number divided by zero is no number?

Mathematicians say that $0/0$ is indeterminate, since the result can be any number. They get to that answer using the same logic as above. If $0/0 = N$, you can multiply both sides by zero and get $0 = 0 \times N$. This is true for all numbers N . So the result can be any number at all. This is quite different from $1/0$ where the result is no number at all.

Even with addition, zero is a special case. Every number N has an additive inverse ($-N$). When you add a number to its additive inverse, the result is 0. For example, 2 plus -2 equals zero. Zero is special in that it is the only number that is its own additive inverse. $0 + 0 = 0$.

OFF BY ONE

Most people start counting from one—but sometimes it can be

useful to start with zero. Suppose you're trying to find the period of a pendulum, the time it takes the pendulum to swing back and forth and return to the same spot.

You could start the pendulum swinging and use a stopwatch to time how long it takes to go from one end of its swing to the other and return. But to get a more accurate measurement, you'd be better off timing ten swings of the pendulum and then dividing the total time for ten swings by ten.

If you do this you should count "zero" as you start the stopwatch, count "one" the first time the pendulum returns to its starting point, and count again each time the pendulum returns until you reach "ten" and stop the watch. If you count "one" when you start the watch, count again each time the pendulum returns, and stop at "ten," you will time only nine complete swings, not ten. This counting error occurs so often it has its own name—the "off by one" error.

THE YEAR ZERO

Zero—by its absence—is also responsible for all that annoying discussion back on January 1, 2000, when lots of people celebrated the

turn of the century. Folks at the U.S. Naval Observatory pointed out the correct time to celebrate the next 1000 years was in January 2001. Why the discrepancy?

Our current Gregorian Calendar was adapted from the Julian Calendar in 1582, before zero entered into common use. As a result there is no year 0. We go straight from 1 B.C. to 1 A.D.

This makes counting difficult. There is only one year between January First in 1 B.C. and January First in 1 A.D. On a number line, there are two units between -1 and 1.

Starting counting from the Year One is a bit like counting one when you start your stopwatch, rather than waiting for the first swing of the pendulum. You end up with an "off by one" error.

This antipathy toward zero is not true of all calendars. The Maya started every month with day 0. In one of their calendars they had 18 months of 20 days numbered 0 to 19, and one month of 5 days numbered 0 to 4.

IT ALL COMES TO NOTHING

Incidentally, the zero isn't the only case where nothing ends up

being very important. In music, the rest is just as important as the notes. In graphic design, whitespace is just as important (or perhaps even more important) than the space that's filled with pictures and type.

Today, it's hard not to take the zero for granted. It's a goose egg, a whole lot of nothing. But without the zero — and the higher mathematics that its invention made possible — the progress of modern science, industry, and commerce was unlikely, if not impossible.

The invention of something which represents nothing changed the world. And if that's not science fiction, we don't know what is.

The Exploratorium is San Francisco's museum of science, art, and human perception — where science and science fiction meet. Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty both work there. To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at www.brazenhussies.net/murphy. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit www.exo.net/~pauld.



Esther Friesner reports that she's currently working on a Young Adult novel entitled Temping Fate, concerning a teenager working at a firm that provides temp workers for various deities. Her latest story for us also happens to be about a young woman who runs into an organization that deals in the realm of the uncanny.

The Beau and the Beast

By Esther M. Friesner

M

AY 7, 1819

The Royal Pavilion, Brighton

Dearest Mamma,

I hope this finds you well, likewise that you will find it within your heart to forgive me for having so long neglected my filial duty. This is truly the first opportunity I have had to write to you. Ever since your sister, my Aunt Elizabeth, took it upon herself to introduce me to Society, my life has been a dizzying round of balls, routs, whist parties, visits, and the thousand other obligations to which a young woman of good family (if modest dowry) must submit her person if she wishes to make a proper marriage.

If this gay whirl were the whole of it, I might bear my social requirements easily enough, but I find matters complicated by the fact that dearest Aunt Elizabeth is mad as a bag of snakes. Think not the worse of me for thus characterizing a lady whose wealth is the talk of the family. Did not you and darling Pappa speak of her dubious sanity in much the same terms before you nonetheless consigned me to her keeping? I dare swear that the many gifts of ready money accompanying

her pleas for my companionship in no way swayed your ultimate decision.

As you know, Aunt Elizabeth is still an acclaimed beauty and a particular favourite of H. R. H. George, Prince Regent of our fair land ever since his royal father's reign being called on account of sheer barking insanity. Indeed, the two of them stand upon such intimate terms that I have heard her call him "Prinny" and heard him call on her after midnight.

Too, through her marriage to the late Algernon, Lord Wibbley, she has fallen heir to certain duties incumbent upon our aristocracy. *Noblesse oblige*. Thus when His Highness's pleasure decreed the removal of the Court from London to the airy seaside delights of Brighton, nothing would satisfy him save that Auntie and I must pack up, bag and baggage, and follow.

We are presently installed in certain apartments within the Royal Pavilion, an edifice whose outward *hommage* to the more effusively flamboyant native palaces of distant India is only superseded upon the field of Wretched Excess by the abuse of rampant *chinoiserie* within. My bedroom is besieged by ceramic monkeys to a degree whereby I cannot banish them even in dreams. They chitter. There is also the matter of superfluous tassels, great fat silky ones that depend from every possible (if not feasible) place in the room, to no perceptible purpose. Moreover, the walls are decorated with a sulfurous yellow paper that puts me in mind of poor Uncle Edward's eyes just before he said, "Why thank you, I do believe I *will* have just one more glass of Madeira," and perished at the breakfast table.

Such unfortunate effects and associations as my room evokes are why I now write this missive by moonlight from a bench within sight of the sea. Do not be concerned for my safety. Though I am a lone maiden, I assure you that the Pavilion grounds are thoroughly patrolled at all hours of the day and night. None may venture here unchallenged save the *ton*, the very flower and cream of Society, the Prince Regent's hundred or so nearest friends.

The moon is almost at the full, else I would not have light enough by which to wield my pen. Its silvery brilliance likewise discloses a pair of gentlemen taking the evening air at the far seaward border of the grounds. They do not see me, for my bench is secluded by the pendant branches of

a willow. My view, however, is clear enough to identify them as *beaux* — those dashing young sparks of the Court whose obsession with fashion makes them the spiritual heirs to that late, bewigged and overpowdered dandy of the past, the “macaroni.” As I write, they are taking the little pathway that leads from the Pavilion grounds to the rough shingle of the roaring sea. What can this mean? At this late hour the strand must be deserted. What possible allure could the abandoned verge of old Oceanus hold for anyone, especially men whose whole life needs must center upon the approved frivolities of the Prince Regent’s circle?

What a curious thing is a maiden’s Fancy! The more I write of these errant *beaux*, the more I confess myself intrigued by my own speculations. From the Pavilion comes the sound of music and laughter, the clink of gold pieces at the gaming tables and the sharp slap of a folded fan upon the hand of an over-ardent wooer. From the sea whither my mysterious *beaux* have vanished comes only...silence.

Fear not, dearest Mamma, I am by no means about to set aside my pen in order to follow them, solely to satisfy immodest curiosity or romantic whim. Truly, in all sincerity, upon my word of honour, I am not. In this pray trust me utterly who do remain:

Your dutiful daughter,
Caroline

May 8, 1819
The Royal Pavilion, Brighton

Dearest Mamma,

You will be relieved to hear that the brace of *beaux* I followed to the seashore (at a respectable distance, *bien sûr*) are gentlemen of good birth, impeccable breeding, and pious natures. This I came to learn soon after the elder of the two — James Southland, Lord Cassian — took note of my ‘til-then furtive presence. (Alas, I was discovered when I took a misstep upon the shingle, twisted my ankle, and collapsed with an exclamation I have often heard Aunt Elizabeth employ on those occasions when her pet, Puddles, demonstrates upon her carpets just how he got his name.)

Well you may imagine my discomfiture as Lord Cassian and his

companion, Sir Simon Finbarr, came to my aid. I was quite mortified, struggling to cobble up some plausible excuse for my uninvited presence. As it happened, I might have spared myself the worry.

"What a happy circumstance, Simon!" Lord Cassian exclaimed as he tendered me a gallant hand. "I had no idea that there were more of the Faithful about, yet here we have the answer to our prayers!"

"Indeed," Sir Simon replied, regarding me with a chaste glance. "Truly the gods look with approval upon our entreaties. We *do* want a second opinion in the matter of the site of our impending observances. I've always said that a woman's eye for natural beauty is best. She shall tell us whether the spot we've chosen is both sufficiently isolated and alluring."

Lord Cassian stroked his chin and frowned. It was not a grimace of disapproval, merely of intense mental concentration. "Perhaps," he said at last. Then, to me: "My dear young woman, since you are obviously one of us — else why would you be wandering the strand at this hour, unchaperoned — might we ask the favour of your name?"

Meekly I murmured that I would be pleased to accommodate them in this as in all things not above my station nor detrimental to my person, morals, or character. I further added that I hoped I might depend upon their discretion in not mentioning any of this to my guardian Elizabeth, Lady Wibbley, as she might disapprove of my consorting with gentlemen to whom I had not been properly introduced.

At the mention of Aunt Elizabeth's name, Lord Cassian and Sir Simon both broke into excesses of glee.

"Good heavens, you don't mean to say you're Mad Lizzie's gel!" Lord Cassian slapped his doeskin-sheathed thigh out of pure delight. "Little Caroline Yardley, that country cleric's daughter? I *thought* I recognized you from the Pavilion!"

When I quite justifiably reproved him for referring to my aunt by so disrespectful a byname, he hastened to reassure me that everyone, simply *everyone* in the congregation spoke of her thus.

"Congregation?" I echoed.

"Why, yes," said Sir Simon, with a roguish wink. "There's not a finer hand with an obsidian dagger than our Mad Lizzie. Snick-snack, Tsathoggua's your uncle, and there's one more sacrifice sent tumbling off the basalt altar and into the fathomless gulf between the stars, eh wot?"

This revelation broke over me like a thunderclap. His words left me with no room whatsoever for comforting doubt. All was clear; I could draw but one soul-sickening conclusion from this talk of black daggers, grim altars, and the Abyss: My Aunt Elizabeth had become a Methodist!

I burst into storms of tears, which caused both gentlemen to offer me, with all haste, earnest words of comfort. They did their best to persuade me that Aunt Elizabeth had not in fact gone over to the riotous hedonism of the Methodists but rather remained steadfast in her adherence to the Church of England. When I made bold as to point out that the C. of E. does not usually include the use of obsidian daggers in the Order of Service, Lord Cassian took pity upon my distress:

"My dear Miss Caroline, your words reveal that we were mistaken in presuming you to be one of our shared devotions. That being so, permit me to clarify and thus relieve your mind as to your aunt's spiritual health. Pray tell me, does she patronize only one dressmaker? Only one milliner, one vintner? Certainly not! For often one merchant will not have in stock that particular item which will most suit milady's tastes. Hence what harm is there in going to this merchant for one item and that fellow for another? To, as it were, shop around? And if a woman of good taste and breeding may thus act in matters of domestic economy, why may she not do likewise in matters of faith?"

Seeing the good sense in his words (and being reassured as to Aunt Elizabeth's orthodoxy), my conscience was assuaged. Grateful, I begged their pardon for my recent emotional outburst.

"Speak of it no more!" cried Sir Simon, holding up his hands to the waxing moon. "It is no offense to be uninformed and even less to be such a fond niece. Of course it is rather a shame that you're not one of us. We could use the new blood."

I thanked him for his good opinion and, since the voice of Conscience no longer overwhelmed the clamor of Curiosity, I added: "Aunt Elizabeth has been very good to me. I believe it would demonstrate proper appreciation of her benevolence were I to join her supplemental church."

At this, Lord Cassian frowned in earnest. "I am afraid that is out of the question. We have no time at present for the acceptance and instruction of postulants. Within three days the moon will be at the full, when our practices demand the performance of certain obligatory rites and orisons.

We do not encourage or permit the presence of the uninitiated save in one role only, and I do not think you would find it to your liking."

I did my best to stem the tears that once more threatened to flow. O cruelty! And cruelty made the more distressful to come before an innocent maiden in a shape so fair as Lord Cassian's!

By which, dearest Mamma, I mean his *spiritual* shape, of course.

Indeed, the memory of his graceful soul, the recollection of his enticing character, the remembrance of his delectable moral fiber and alluring virtue are such that I will now end this missive, that I might betake myself to some privy place and give myself over to pious meditation upon the subject. For the which I pray you will excuse:

Your devout and devoted daughter,
Caroline

May 9, 1819

The Royal Pavilion, Brighton

Dearest Mamma,

After entrusting my previous missive to the post, it struck me that I had perhaps expressed myself in an unfortunate manner. Allow me to reassure you: My effusions regarding Lord Cassian are utterly chaste and proper. On no account use the contents of my earlier letter as impetus to travel hither to Brighton, fearing for my innocence! Aunt Elizabeth would not like that. She has said so to me in the most unmistakable terms. While I do not pretend to possess an eidetic memory, her exact words in this case were: "Tell my sister, your dear mamma, to stay right where she bloody well is and mind her own d-mned business if she ever wants to see one ha'penny of my money, the nosey cow. And do give her my love."

You see, Mamma, there was no cause for shame in my evening's encounter with Sir Simon and Lord Cassian, for I kept no detail of it from Aunt Elizabeth. Rather I gave her a full account of our inadvertent interview, taking care to speak reverently of my desire to be instructed in that unnamed supplemental Faith which she shares with them. I further stated my willingness to wait for the proper time to begin my studies, citing Lord Cassian's objections to my immediate participation.

She took me to her bosom at once, exulting over my aspirations. "Dear child!" she cried. "You need not wait an instant and you must not mind a single thing Lord Cassian tells you. He is a dear boy, but *such* a stick-in-the-mud on matters of religion. You *shall* join us at once and be a part of our impending ceremonies. I promise you, this was my intention from the first moment that I petitioned your parents for your company, though I never expected the delectable surprise of finding you so willing. A sweet maiden of your tender years is just what our jolly little group needs. Er, you don't mind my calling you a sweet *maiden*, do you?"

"Dear Aunt, whyever should I mind that?" I inquired in all innocence.

She waved her hand in a dismissive manner. "Oh, no reason, none at all, not one. Well, perhaps a small one: You are a shrewd young woman and your eyes work. No doubt you have noted the atmosphere of some...licentiousness that pervades dear Prinny's court?"

Hereat I felt the blood mount to my cheeks and, with downcast eyes, muttered something noncommittal. Aunt Elizabeth gently lifted my chin and smiled her approval.

"Even so," she said. "And yet in the midst of so much carnal abandon, you have retained that stainless flower that is so needful — that is to say, so indispensable — I mean, such a prerequisite for —"

Ah, dear Mamma, as Aunt Elizabeth so charmingly dithered over *le mot juste*, I fathomed the pith of what she wished to say. O, scarcely can I credit my blessed lot! Though I have long believed that the occurrence of love at first sight is a phenomenon limited to — forgive me — novels, here was proof of its actuality. What else could Aunt Elizabeth be hinting at that so concerned my inviolate maidenhood? What, save that Lord Cassian himself has conceived a *tendre* for my unworthy self and has employed your sister as his intermediary?

That he should consider me an acceptable helpmate is heady food for thought beyond a doubt, yet a man of his social elevation dare not let love blind him to his familial obligations. For the sake of his ancestors' honour and for the assured paternity of his issue, he must of course make inquiries as to my virtue before pursuing the subject further.

Thus matters stand. No doubt Aunt Elizabeth shall do her best to chivvy along Lord Cassian's courtship. We all know her to be the managing sort and a straightforward woman, which in this case is a

blessing. O dearest Mamma, shall I — *dare* I hope that when next we meet you shall greet not merely your daughter but the betrothed of James Southland, Lord Cassian?

To this end I have taken it upon myself to press Aunt Elizabeth for some bit of information, no matter how small, as to what I may expect at tomorrow's rites. It would not do for Lord Cassian to see his prospective bride standing there like a very Guy, mute and ignorant.

At first she demurred, telling me that my part in the ceremony would be self-evident. I persisted, whereupon she gave me a great, musty volume to read, an educational text called the *Necronomicon*. I fear darling Pappa will be disappointed to learn that my Latin was not equal to the task. I soon came a cropper and returned the book to Aunt Elizabeth, once more begging her for personal instruction.

Mamma, you know as well as I your sister's headstrong nature, and so I count it a true triumph that she has at last consented to give me my way in this. She bids me await her here while she seeks some simpler texts that will aid her in my religious education. Meanwhile she has poured me a glass of the most delightful plum cordial wherewith to refresh myself.

How glad I am that this dear, good Lady shall be my help upon the path to domestic bliss! How excellent it is that she agrees it would be advantageous that I embrace Lord Cassian's faith before I dream of embracing his —

May 10, 1819

To the One Who May Find This Missive, Greetings.

Be so kind as to fulfill a condemned girl's last request and convey this posthaste to the Reverend Dr. and Mrs. Issachar Yardley, The Hemlocks, Lesser Murrain, Sussex. And while you are at it, pray see if you cannot hunt down my d-mned Aunt Elizabeth, Lady Wibbly, and stick a hedgehog in her smallclothes.

O, I have been betrayed! As I sat at my escritoire, composing a letter to my dearest Mother (whose loving face I shall nevermore see in this life) I took a sip of the plum cordial which Aunt Elizabeth had poured me, praising its healthful purgative powers and urging me to drink deep. So I did, only to be purged of consciousness!

I awakened here, within the close confines of — the horror! — a sea-bathing machine. This sturdy contrivance, which allows women of good fame to enter the healthful brine without exposing their moistened forms to the prying eyes of oglers, has become my prison. Both the seaward and shoreward doors are locked, no doubt soundly bolted from without. Air and some poor measure of light trickle in through a lone window on the seaward door, far too small to offer me any possibility of escape.

Thus must I sit here, awaiting whatever dreadful fate shall be mine. I give thanks for the minuscule Mercy that has permitted one of the previous occupants of this vehicle to leave behind a lap desk. It somehow soothes my troubled spirit to believe that after I have met my doom, this record shall remain. I shall complete it, then secrete it beneath this bench in hopes that it will come to light in the hands of a decent, moral, Godfearing soul who shall remember me.

Dearest Mamma, most beloved Pappa, if this last communication from your wretched child should, by Divine Grace, find its way to you, I hope you rot. None of this would have happened if you had not forced me to accompany Aunt Elizabeth. Your greed for that overripe jade's money has done this to me. Words cannot express the depth of my rancor. If I survive, I swear to you by all holy that I shall do such things to the family name as would make a Caligula swoon into the arms of a well-favored gladiator!

I would unburden myself of still more daughterly sentiments, but the light dims apace. Soon I will be unable to set pen to paper, and though the full moon is to rise later this night, I do not know whether I will be alive to see it.

With the first blood-red tinge of sunset upon the waters a low, rhythmic sound has arisen. I am unable to determine its provenance, for that remains beyond the scope of my limited vision through the bathing machine window. It seems to come from the shore, though some acoustical trick persuades my addled senses that it is answered from the depths of the sea. Ah, but it is a terrible thing to hear! I would name it some sort of choral chant produced by human voices, save that the words that reach my ears — if words they are — are in a strange and eldritch tongue.

Dear Pappa, before a just God ordains that you strangle on your own covetousness, perhaps it might amuse you to identify that obscure

language and attempt a translation of these arcane syllables that I shall do my best to here transliterate for you:

Iä, Iä, C'thulhu —

F'tzhrbrt!

F'tango!

F'thagn!

Alas, the final syllables elude me. But enough. There suddenly has come a shift in tone of the chanting, an augmentation in volume and intensity, an acceleration in tempo as though that unhallowed hymn were building toward some abhorrent climax. Whatever bizarre purpose lies behind such unearthly incantations, I fear it soon will be accomplished. My heart sinks, for I dread that my own unhappy fate is firmly linked to the occult object of that hideous litany.

As I stand upon tiptoe and peer out through my paltry window on the world, I discern an upheaval upon the face of the deep. The waters roil and froth prodigiously. In the distance I see a great dark bulk heaving itself above the waves, but it is as yet too far off for me to determine what it might be.

Now I spy a host of people coming forward into view from either side of my prison. I hear their feet crunch heavily upon the shingle as their ranks wade into the brine. Their mouths move in that selfsame awful invocation which I have been at some pains to describe. May God have mercy, but I know them! I recognize them from the Prince Regent's court! They are bluebloods of the purest strain, the *ton*, highborn lords and ladies all. Once I looked to them with admiration and envy of such refined and delicately drawn countenances, yet now those same features appall and terrify. Ah me, why do so many of them boast a visage that speaks of ancestry owing less to Hampshire than to haddock? Until this moment I never thought that a thing so commonplace as the dearth of chins among the gentry should someday strike me as so sinister!

If I strain to my fullest height I can see their hands upon the framework of the bathing machine. Heavens, have I spent so many hours overseeing Aunt Elizabeth at whist and never noticed that the bejeweled fingers of her fellow gamesters were so blatantly *webbed*? And do these same batrachian appendages presently seek to move my prison deeper

into the water, conveying me, helpless, toward the cyclopean shape that even now rises from the foam like some animate, ill-omened mountain?

And how many mountains — ill-omened or not — have tentacles?

The sea-bathing machine lurches beneath me. They have set their shoulders to the task. They pant at their labor, and yet their voices bellow the same ghastly words over and over, while from the stormy waters comes the vile *responsum*.

Stupid, *stupid* Aunt Elizabeth! Oh, why could it *not* have been Methodists?

Dear Pappa, I beg you forgive my inability to render an exact transcription of that last word of the chant that now reverberates to the very marrow of my bones as I am borne to my doom. Likewise do I beg that the Devil take it *and* you in the bargain, until which time I entreat you to pray for the soul of she who was your undervalued and all too readily disposable daughter,

Caroline

P.S. I hope you burn in —

From the Journal of James Southland, Lord Cassian.

The Royal Pavilion, Brighton

May 7, 1819.

Met girl. First thought: One of us. Mistaken.

Not half bad looking. Winsome. Good hips. Childbearing potential. Underdowered, otherwise well endowed.

Love? Possible. Sweet enough chit. Rather sudden, though.

Will reflect, consider, reach final decision after Invocation of Great Old One at full moon.

Note: Have Glendower see that ceremonial robes aired, sacrificial obsidian blade polished. Greet Lord C'thulhu looking down-at-heels? Hardly.

Idem.

May 8, 1819

The Royal Pavilion, Brighton

Glendower failed to polish sacrificial obsidian blade properly. Fed Glendower to shoggoth. Seeking new manservant. D-mned inconvenient.

Girl much in thoughts. Inexplicably so. Kin to Mad Lizzie, but not so much daft as dim. Fetching: D-mned fine bosoms. Good carriage. Neat in pasterns. Callipygian fundament.

Determined to put girl from thoughts until after ceremony. If Lord C'thulhu stays, Elder Gods overrun Earth, marriage question moot. Impossible to have banns read while entire population of Earth howls and bubbles unspeakable blasphemies in Abyss.

Note: Make inquiries as to girl's character and purity of person, in case Lord C'thulhu buggers off like last time.

Ipsissima.

May 9, 1819

The Royal Pavilion, Brighton

Up early. Spoke with Mad Lizzie re: girl, Caroline.

Clergyman's daughter; that explains dim bit. Lizzie opposed to match on grounds of virginity. Caroline retains same; perfect for sacrifice, successful invocation of Lord C'thulhu. Argued doctrine of *Waste Not, Want Not* with me.

Countered with contention that even if chit-is sole virgin for leagues around, Lord C'thulhu has waited aeons. No tragedy if he waits another month. Surely can find *one* virgin *somewhere* in England, given thirty days' notice? Expedite search by steering clear of Midlands.

Mad Lizzie unconvinced. Sulked. Sicced Puddles on me. Bitten. Bit back. Puddles dead.

Note: Rec'd note of apology from Mad Lizzie this evening accompanied by bottle of plum cordial. D-mned decent of her.

Have Glendower send back note of thanks, consolatory epistle for death of Puddles, replacement pet.

Drat. Remembered: Glendower previously fed to shoggoth. Must tend to domestic matters myself.

Good help easy to slaughter, hard to find. Bother.

Ditto.

May 10, 1819

In Transit

Did not have opportunity to drink plum cordial due to time spent searching for pet to replace Puddles.

Upon return to my rooms, replacement pet drank Mad Lizzie's plum cordial. Did not know reptiles liked plum cordial. Fascinating.

Replacement pet collapsed unconscious. Educational.

Retained own consciousness. Good.

Put two and two together concerning cordial, Mad Lizzie, tonight's ritual, girl. Got four. Good.

Rescued girl. Good.

Saw off Lord C'thulhu. Acceptable. (Note: Hopeless Romantic nature of Great Old One unanticipated but welcome discovery. Saved time, needless death of self, others. Good.)

Chastised disobedient congregation with whips of scorpions. Fun.

Fed Mad Lizzie to shoggoth. Entertaining.

Taking girl to Gretna Green for immediate marriage. Efficient.

Very good day.

May 12, 1819

The Ploughman's Willing Daughter

Gretna Green

Dearest Mamma and Pappa,

I am married.

My husband's high birth and excellencies of person in no way alter those sentiments which I expressed toward you both while pent in sea-bathing machine durance vile. I cannot find it in my heart to forget that it was your avarice that placed me in such mortal peril. Albeit it was that same peril that excited the crisis in my husband's tender feelings toward me, I still hope you rot, though I would prefer it should you concurrently burn.

It is likewise my hope that by the time you peruse this missive, you will have received those sheets which I composed within the aforementioned

sea-bathing machine while' (as I only now know) awaiting sacrifice. You will be otherwise at a loss to comprehend such justifiable animosity in one who hitherto has been the most dutiful of daughters.

To elucidate in brief, I was to die for the spiritual improvement of others, a thing I ere now deemed the exclusive perquisite of the Hebrew race. My lunatic aunt held the belief that her chosen Deity delighted in the blood of virgins and would reward those who provided him with the same. Thus subsequently she had me drugged, abducted, confined, and dragged into the sea to be stretched out upon a basalt altar. As I lay there, pinioned hand and foot, with Aunt Elizabeth poised to slit my throat like a sheep's, there came a glorious flash of light from the shore and James Southland, Lord Cassian, burst upon the gathered throngs of madly ululating worshippers like a heavily armed Roman candle.

Himself a devotee of that same Faith as my late Aunt Elizabeth, he stood in possession of remarkable sorcerous powers, his reward for previous donations whose nature is best left to the tactful silence of the Past. Whatever the price he or others paid to obtain such numinous weaponry, I judge it blood well spilt as it was the saving of mine own.

A brace of loaded horse pistols and the cavalry saber at his belt also proved useful. The whips of scorpions were more for show.

Having dealt summarily with those who sought to do me bodily mischief — including his erstwhile bosom friend Sir Simon and my own demented female relation — Lord Cassian next turned his attentions to the object of their worship. This was a deity addressed with reverence as Lord C'thulhu, a maritime being of great age and awe-inspiring proportions arisen from the ocean like some tentacled Venus. Never did I see the like. Freely I confess myself struck all of a heap, as by Jove's own thunderbolt, to behold the entity to whom Aunt Elizabeth so cavalierly would have sacrificed my precious maidenhood.

As I remained thus transfixed, Lord Cassian spoke sharply to that same immense creature, declaring his designs upon my person in the bluntest terms and avowing his intention to make me his wife, willy-nilly. At these words, I beheld in those alien, obsidian eyes a more than human sensibility to Lord Cassian's protestations. I am even prepared to state 'pon oath that Lord C'thulhu brushed from his eyes some briny drops that were no sea-spray. Then, with a delicacy I have not often

seen in men, he withdrew once more beneath the waves and was gone from my sight.

With that, Lord Cassian swept me from my feet and carried me off to his waiting carriage. We rode without let or hindrance for the North, for as he informed me without possibility of dispute, I should soon be wed at Gretna Green.

And so I was.

It is good to awaken to the dawn following one's wedding day and know oneself to be a Lady in every sense of the word. It is likewise good to acknowledge that after a dark passage wherein I was many times at the hazard of my very life, I am now in a position of such unassailable power as to allow me to speak my mind freely. All this I owe to the pure and utterly devoted love of my husband.

This never would have happened if I had wed Lord Cassian. Though there was no denying my initial infatuation for the man, calf-love is no sound basis upon which a maid should make a marriage. I regret to say he proved himself the sort who stands convinced he knows what's best for a girl. His high-handed declaration that we *would* marry opened my eyes. The man who does not *ask* for one's hand in marriage will never ask for one's opinion upon any subject afterward.

Thus it is a good thing that my husband ate him.

It happened as we were pelting across the Thames. As we reached the midpoint of one of the several bridges spanning that tidal river at London-town, the waters beneath churned, bubbled, seethed like an Irish stew, and disgorged Lord C'thulhu himself in all of his titanic majesty. He stopped our carriage by the simple expedient of devouring the horses, then bent his attention to me.

At first I trembled, fearing he had come to exact from my person the full measure of that tribute which Lord Cassian's intervention had denied him at Brighton. Yet soon enough he set me at my ease, speaking with such reverence and tenderness as to set my heart a-flutter. The fires of a thousand stars burned in the passion of his address to me, pleading his love and imploring me to look favorably upon his suit. He craved my pardon for this abrupt wooing, asserting with all sincerity that my charms had captivated him straightaway he saw me upon the basalt altar, a prodigy he had hitherto believed reserved for the tawdry realm of popular fictions. In

vain he had sought to dissuade himself from pursuing so apparently unfeasible a match, and so had followed me hither, to try the hazard his heart.

In the face of my nonplussed mortal escort, the magnificent bathysmal Lord fervently promised that if I would accept his paw in matrimony, he would cherish me beyond all measure, and would even forego the wanton spilling of maiden's blood customary among his kind to solemnize a marriage, beyond those few consummatory drops which (I blush!) would be unavoidable.

He did not need to ask me twice. He had already won my heart with his past gallantries, and now that he stood entirely clear of the Thames's modestly concealing waters, the evidence of my eyes provided the final persuasion. As his aquatic way of life made the services of a tailor superfluous, Lord C'thulhu's full preeminence stood plain.

And so I accepted his offer of honorable matrimony, to the cheers of the general rout of passers-by and idlers then standing witness to our business upon the bridge. This being London, there was little alarm or concern caused by the irruption of a towering, clawed, bat-winged, squid-visaged, somewhat sizeable personage in their midst, as the people have seen worse every time H. R. H. George, the Prince Regent, makes a royal progress through the city streets.

Lord Cassian objected most stridently, nor would he under any circumstance make an honourable withdrawal from the field of Venus. He was ingested in the cause of civic peace. Having thus disposed of affairs, Lord C'thulhu by his arcane powers whisked me off to Gretna Green, considerably sparing me the vexations of a coach ride. Can you wonder that I love him?

I realize that by marrying a being from beyond the stars I have placed myself likewise beyond the pale of the Church of England and thus cannot hope for your blessing. Pray ask me if I give a tuppenny d-mn.

We shall pass a honeymoon journey of some three months' time in Switzerland, Germany, the sunny climes of Italy and the frozen Plateau of Leng, after which you may direct all correspondence to:

Caroline, Lady C'thulhu
Mon Repos

Sunken R'lyeh
Oceanus Pacificus

Yet in this matter be forewarned of the unlikelihood of reply, as I now live in hopes that our sole future communication will be receipt of the happy notice that you have both been devoured by shoggoths.

In closing, it gives me overwhelming joy to forward you a copy of dear, dear Aunt Elizabeth's Last Will and Testament. By its terms, the bulk of her estate devolves to me, and serve you right. Yet you are somewhat remembered. This letter comes to you accompanied by her posthumous gift, the *Necronomicon*: a valuable antique volume containing the Hermetic scholarship of one Adbul al-Hazred, translated into Latin from the original Arabic. I am certain, darling Pappa, that you will derive great intellectual improvement by reading it.

However, I caution you: *Under no circumstances do so aloud*, particularly with respect to the ~~shoggoth invocation~~ text on page 382, as it is rumored to be an infallible method for the location of vast ancient treasure-troves if intoned at the full moon while accompanied by a white dog and precisely three pints of goose blood.

And with this do I at last bid you...

~~Adieu plus agés.~~

Adieu.

Caroline

*She may climb high, though dim or daft,
Who practices Love's Art and Craft.*

— from the Poetic Journals of the late Elizabeth, Lady Wibbley —



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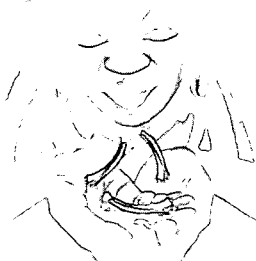
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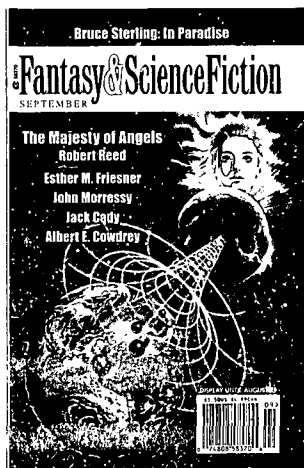
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